Strings and Threads

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Various short stories, ranging anywhere from pre-canon to post-canon to nowhere-near-canon. Various characters and relationships. Now up: lots and lots. You are not alone anymore. We all love you, lots and lots.

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Introduction
I want to know - Isshin
Candy Counter Girl - Ryumako
Always - Ryuko, Senketsu, Mako
Snow All the Same - Ryuko, Senketsu
Anywhere Else - Ryuketsu
Chichibu-Tama-Kai - Soichiro, Ryuko
Latte - Ryuko, ?
I Don't Make Messes - NuiJunketsu
Programmed Love - Ryuko, Senketsu
310 1 12 - Mako, Ryuko, Senketsu, Sats
Something He Could Never Be - Ryuketsu
Cup Curry Rice - Ryuko, Sukuyo, Mako
Arms - Senketsu, Ryuko
nonsense - Ryuketsu
breathe in, breathe out - ?, Satsuki
green apples - Mako, Omiko
Latte 0 - ?, Ryuko
heart hand - Ragyo
He is Not Her Friend - Gama, Ryuko, Mako
Go Back - Ryuko, Senketsu
fee - Senketsu, Ryuko
can't even remember yesterday - Sen, Ryu
cream and ivory - Ryuko, ?
Rose-Colored Hair - Satsunon
The Girl Can't Help It - Sats, Ryu, Mako
comfortable - Ryuko, Sen, Satsuki, Mako

pretend - Satsuki, Ryuko
Something He Always Was - Ryu, Sen, Sats
never had - Satsuki, Ryuko
that's all - Ryuko, OC
Umi-Kyuuketsuki - Ryuko, ?
leftovers - Ryuko, Senketsu, Aikuro
real life - Ryuko, Senketsu
your sound - Senketsu, Ryuko
kiss - Ryumako
four - Senketsu, Ryuko
lots and lots - Ryuko

I want to know - Isshin

Foreword

Strings and Threads is a collection of *Kill la Kill* short stories I've written over the years. The characters, settings, and scenarios vary from piece to piece, though you might find some *common threads*, if you will.

Concrit-or just crit, such as, "Present tense is terrible!"-is appreciated. I also accept prompts for future stories.

Story List

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*Characters are listed from most prominent to least prominent, with the first-listed character typically being the POV character. Any title marked with a * has detailed author's notes/commentary.*

1: *I want to know* - The worst part is the sound. (Isshin, 500 words.)

2: *Candy Counter Girl* - A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Ryumako in a candy store." (Mako/Ryuko, 300 words.)

3: *Always* - "It seems you're back to eating dinner alone." Inspired by Ryuko wearing Senketsu's glove to bed in the manga version of episode 7, "A Loser I Can't Hate." (Ryuko, Senketsu, Mako, 1,000 words.)

4: *Snow All the Same* - He'd never gotten to see the snow. Inspired by Sushio's 2015 Christmas comic. (Ryuko, Senketsu, 900 words.)

5: *Anywhere Else* - It sucks being in different Houses, and it sucks even more that the one person in all of Hogwarts who should get

where she's coming from never seems to. A short fiction AU with the prompt, "Ryuketsu, Harry Potter AU." (Ryuko/Senketsu, 900 words.)

6: *Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park* - Even if it's just for a moment, Soichiro Kiryuin wants to believe he can have it all. (Soichiro, Ryuko, 2,900 words.)

7: *Latte* - She doesn't expect to see him at the café, but she has time to talk. (Ryuko, ?, 600 words.)

8: *I Don't Make Messes I Make Art* - It's all so very expected, but she can't find it in her to care. A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Nui/human!Junketsu, college AU." (Nui/Junketsu, 200 words.)

9: *Programmed Love* - Maybe Ryuko would have been able to prove her father wrong, if a certain someone didn't get in her way. (Ryuko, Senketsu, 7,200 words.)

10: *310 1 12* - "… the one who would be hurt most of all would be you." (So, who's been around long enough to understand this title?) (Mako, Ryuko, Senketsu, Satsuki, 1,500 words.)

11: *Something He Could Never Be* - A mermaid with legs is still a mermaid. A robot with a soul is still a robot. All this Ryuko knows. And yet… she's never been more certain in her life that nothing will ever be more warm and loving than that stupid, irritating, worthless smile. (Or, basically the most romantic Ryuketsu-y thing I have ever written. "Sci-fi" AU that's really not very scientific at all.) (Ryuko/Senketsu, 3,300 words.)

12: *Cup Curry Rice* - Ryuko doesn't care for any of that excessive stuff. Just give her something that does the job, and she's happy. Right? A Mother's Day piece. (Ryuko, Sukuyo, Mako, 2,300 words.)

13: *Arms* - A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Ryuketsu, feudal Japan." (Senketsu, Ryuko, 200 words.)

14: *nonsense** - You can be anything you want, but always, every time, you choose to be mine. (Senketsu/Ryuko, 2,300 words.)

15: *breathe in, breathe out* - He barely knew any of 'em, after all, and she was no exception. Still, when he sees her again, he sticks around. (?, Satsuki, 2,300 words.)

16: *green apples* - Mako was part of the Tennis Club, once. Based on pages 31-37 of "Mako's Story" included in Sushio's *SUSHIO CLUB LOVE LOVE KLKL* . (Mako, Omiko, 600 words.)

17: *Latte 0* - She does expect to see him at the café, but she doesn't have time to talk. A companion piece to Chapter 7, "Latte," though this story can be understood on its own. (?, Ryuko, 1,900 words.)

18: *heart hand* - But Ragyo Kiryuin is not the villain. (Ragyo, 400 words.)

19: *He is Not Her Friend* - He is not her friend, but when he catches her disappearing into the woods by his old junior high, he raises an eyebrow. (This has so many references to the Elite Four Light Novel.) (Gamagoori, Ryuko, Mako, 3,700 words.)

20: *Go Back* - Maybe lies are better. Lies don't hurt. (Ryuko, Senketsu, 1,200 words.)

21: *fee* - Ryuko makes Senketsu some gameni to eat. (Senketsu, Ryuko, 1,300 words.)

22: *can't even remember yesterday* - A chance encounter might not really be so "chance" after all, but it's not like he would know. (Senketsu, Ryuko, 1,000 words.)

23: *cream and ivory* - Satsuki Kiryuin is too late. (Ryuko, ?, 2,000 words.)

24: *The Woman with the Rose-Colored Hair* - In the grandest city in the world, there lives a girl with rose-colored hair who wishes for

nothing more than the heart of the finest lady in the land. (Nonon/Satsuki, 3,000 words.)

25: *The Girl Can't Help It* - Ryuko already has an older sister. (Satsuki, Ryuko, Mako, 2,500 words.)

26: *comfortable** - A trip to the movies becomes something more. (Ryuko, Senketsu, Satsuki, Mako, 11,900 words.)

27: *pretend** - But how do you stop pretending? (Satsuki, Ryuko, 1,700 words.)

28: *Something He Always Was* - Robots aren't really cold at all, are they? A companion piece to chapter 11, "Something He Could Never Be," though this story can be understood on its own. (Ryuko, Senketsu, Satsuki, 2,200 words.)

29: *never had* - Satsuki and Ryuko talk about grown-up stuff. (Satsuki, Ryuko, 1,700 words.)

30: *that's all* - There's a girl who wears a yellow chrysanthemum in her hair. (Ryuko, OC, 700 words.)

31: *Umi-Kyuuketsuki* - Ryuko Matoi hates the sea. A story for Mer-May. (Ryuko, ?, 2,000 words.)

32: *leftovers* - Ryuko decides to spend the night in her father's old office at Nudist Beach HQ. (Ryuko, Senketsu, Aikuro, 6,000 words.)

33: *real life* - Ryuko would beat up everyone in Hogwarts if she had to. But it's not really for him. An alternate version of chapter 5, "Anywhere Else." (Ryuko, Senketsu, 1,400 words.)

34: *your sound* - As though such simple words could convey what the sound means to him. (Senketsu, Ryuko, 1,900 words.)

35: *kiss* - Ryuko has heard the question before. She's heard it asked many times, across many years, the words spilling from those lips she's come to know well. (Ryuko/Mako, 6,200 words.)

36: *four* - There have been four years and four cakes but only one wish, and perhaps he has never wished for this wish to come true more than he does now. (Senketsu, Ryuko, 5,800 words.)

37: *lots and lots* - You are not alone anymore. We all love you, lots and lots. (Ryuko, 500 words.)

I want to know

She's calling for him.

It's an ugly sound. Raw and angry, full of a passion he can't understand and doesn't want to. He would say quite frankly that it's the worst thing he's ever heard, and yet he strains to hear her anyway, blocking out the rapid *thumps* of his heart beating too loud in his ears and the vicious *snarl* of the flames as they inch ever closer just so he can make out that damned word she's repeating over and over, the sound pounding into every last fiber of his being.

He gulps in hot air. Well, he imagined he'd go down sooner or later, but never like this. Never so pathetic, unfinished, with a gaping hole in his stomach and his whole life literally collapsing in on him. Right before his eyes- *eye* -everything's melting and cracking, crumbling to ashes. There goes the wall he had to paint over twenty times back when Ryuko was a toddler, when she always found her way to crayons and pens and anything else that would leave a mark. There goes the kitchen table he spent too much on. There goes the "happy family photo" Kinue urged him to get.

And maybe it's his own selfishness and egotism that leads him to look towards his study, to his desk that's now engulfed in flames, towards his books scattered on the floor, to all the burning bookcases. And maybe it's his own pettiness that in the mess of fire and smoke he can see instead the dusty shelves of his childhood library, can imagine for a moment his tiny hands brushing over the spines of all the books that whisper words of science. Maybe it's his

own stupidity that he's still able to think back to then, to sitting in the non-fiction section as sunlight pours over him and he drinks in all that the books say, reading more and more, a whole stack of them beside him as he spends entire afternoons falling into the world of knowledge. The wood creaking, pages crumbling to ash, he's still reaching further and further back, grabbing on to that innocence that was once his, holding on to that youthful curiosity, that childish desire that once sent him wandering the aisles of old, wrinkled novels where he learned that to artists there is a feeling that comes with death, a smell, a taste, a look.

But slumped up against the wall with his life hanging on its last threads, he knows that the worst of it all is the sound. It keeps going, keeps getting worse, breaks out into a mess of sobs and screaming. And as he listens, as he presses a hand to the blood that won't stop flowing, as he turns his failing vision towards their old photograph-to the little girl that won't smile-and as the flames finally reach him, he no longer hears any anger or resentment in that sound, in that name he never deserved, in her desperate cries of *Dad* .

He hears only sadness.

Candy Counter Girl - Ryumako

Candy Counter Girl

The girl behind the candy counter is no good with customers, never smiling at them like she should and always wearing this embarrassed, uncomfortable look on her face like she just wants to tear the frilly mess of pink lace and ribbons that serves as her uniform straight off her body every second she stands there working. The customer service is so piss-poor that Mako's ritual of going there whenever she's scrounged up enough money to buy any small little candy doesn't make any sense at all, and she can't say exactly why she does it herself, not really, only that the candy counter girl is in her homeroom class and once she caught her playing the guitar and singing by herself when she thought no one was watching and Mako looked and listened and figured back then that the candy counter girl is an Idol and Gorgeous and Fabulous and for now that's a secret only she knows but one day she'll make the rest of the world know too, once she can just get the candy counter girl to smile.

But that afternoon as the candy counter girl rings her up for a tiny Meiji Chocolate bar after school their eyes meet for a moment longer than usual and suddenly Mako isn't seeing her from afar but right up close and standing there with her candy in hand it's not the Perfect, Gorgeous, Fabulous Idol before her but a seventeen-year-old girl with wide, tired eyes that won't focus right and a nervous, quivering lip as she murmurs, scarcely audible, "Please, come again."

A/N: A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Ryumako in a candy store."

Always - Ryuko, Senketsu, Mako

Always

They're a washed-out sort of orange, a rusty gray. Cotton. Almost 100%.

The first time she wears them is long after she'd bought them, after she'd eaten dinner alone, after the house had become deathly silent.

Mako had gone straight to the aisles filled with rows and rows of dresses.

Summer dresses with skirts that fell comfortably right above the knee, dresses more stiff and formal than anything she'd ever owned, sundresses splattered with bright, tie-dyed flowers, it didn't matter to her. She danced through all of them, laughing as she tore the garments from their hangers, as she pressed the fabric up against her school uniform, against Ryuko, against Senketsu, as she imagined what it would look like, to be wearing such a thing. She piled the best ones in her arms, piling on more and more as she attacked the other sections, as she rifled through blouses with V-necks and scoops and covered in polka dots, and then the A-line skirts and pencil skirts and high heels and tinted glasses and…

But not Ryuko. Ryuko shook her head at every outfit Mako proffered, refused every item. It was only in the nightwear section that she reached for anything, rejecting the colorful prints, the paisley nightgown with lace on its sleeves and the crinkled edges of its skirt.

A button-up top and long, loose-fitting pants. These are the only things *she* brings into the dressing room.

The fabric feels strange in her hands as she steps inside. She closes the curtain behind her with a gentle *whir*, a blush coloring her cheeks as her reflection immediately greets her and she's hit with the realization that she's never done this before.

Not like *this* .

She turns away from the mirror as quickly as she had faced it, looking back towards the curtain. It's a pale, daffodil-yellow sort of thing, speckled with tiny white stars. Far too tacky for a ritzy boutique like this, she thinks, but then, the bland outfit she's clutching is surely just as out of place. She hangs it awkwardly on the included hook, sighing as she looks down at Senketsu.

"No peeking," she says, pulling him off. He says nothing as she places him face-down on the bench in the room, motionless as she turns towards the mirror once more.

"Senketsu?" she asks.

"Yes. I heard you."

"Good."

She rolls her eyes. This new fabric is cool against her skin, almost stiff, but still soft. It's thicker than she expected when she had picked it out, surely good for keeping warm as the weather takes a turn for the worst. She pulls her hair loose from the shirt as she tugs it over her arms. She fixes the collar. It fits her well, she thinks. Comfortable.

She turns back towards Senketsu. He still hasn't moved.

"You can look now," she tells him.

He sits up slowly.

"So," she starts. A part of her is glad for a moment that she is not wearing him. He'd undoubtedly hear her heart beat on a bit quicker,

feel her body temperature rise. "How does this look?"

She watches as his eye darts up and down. "Is this all you're getting, Ryuko?" he asks.

Of course, he'd heard all Mako's prodding to get more, seen the way she'd looked from Ryuko to Senketsu, as though to say something that she never voiced.

Unconsciously, Ryuko fiddles with the top button on her blouse. "Those old hand-me-downs from Mako are too small," she tells him. "So I just need new pajamas. Nothing else."

She ends up buying them. Mako has to get seven bags (and a half) to hold all her new clothes, but Ryuko decides to simply carry her purchase out. It costs her 1700 yen.

Mako tells her to throw the old pajamas away.

The ones with the bunny print, with the worn elastic on the pants, and the top that didn't fit her right.

You can get rid of them, Mako says. I don't mind.

Ryuko keeps them, though, stuffed in a drawer in their new dresser.

The night she first wears the new pajamas, she wakes with a start from a nightmare.

Senketsu wakes with her, she feels it, and she holds her hand to her heart, as though to soothe him.

"I'm okay," she assures him, for over her hand is his glove, and she knows that he can feel her heartbeat like this. "Just… a bad dream. That's all."

She rises from bed, carelessly stripping the pajamas from her body.

"Ryuko…" she hears Senketsu say, but she ignores him, stepping over the pile of her rejected clothes as she tears open the drawer of her dresser, pulling out the only other garment she keeps inside.

They still smell faintly like Mrs. Mankanshoku's croquettes, no matter how much that woman had scrubbed them clean. Ryuko could never place the scent of the detergent. Like citrus, perhaps, mixed with a cucumber, and vanilla. A terrible combination, anyone else would say. But to Ryuko nothing smells better, and she pulls the old, worn things over herself, sighing as she feels once more the familiar tightness of the top, and the way the pants ought to fall off her any moment, with the state of the elastic band inside it.

She doesn't know what's become of the polka-dotted blanket that had been named hers, but curling up on the floor beside where Senketsu hangs, she thinks to herself that This is enough, for now. Just this.

"Ryuko," Senketsu says, once more.

"I dreamed I lost you," she admits, quietly. "Torn up into a million pieces."

He's silent. Waiting for her to go on. Waiting for her to say it, what she couldn't say at dinner, that it's *not* the same, that she's *not* back to eating alone, that it's different now because she has him, because even when everyone else is gone, she'll still…

The words are clogged up in her throat. She laughs.

"It's silly," she manages to whisper. She holds her hand-his hand, their hand-over her heart. "That'll never happen, right? I'll *always* have you, right?"

He stares back at her, eye unblinking.

"Always."

A/N: Inspired by Ryuko wearing Senketsu's glove to bed in the manga version of episode 7, "A Loser I Can't Hate."

Snow All the Same - Ryuko, Senketsu

Snow All the Same

Ryuko Matoi can't sleep.

She spends a good hour and a half counting the dots on the ceiling, the room barely illuminated by the pale light of the moon that drips messily through the curtains, and she loses count after somewhere in the four hundreds or seven hundreds, she doesn't really know. All she knows is that she's pushing away the dreams and the memories that leave her pillows wet and she thinks maybe she's just avoiding it even more as she rises quietly from her bed, but she doesn't stop herself. Her calloused, bare feet brush against the soft, fancy-hotel carpet, her body aching and exhausted as she takes the red scarf folded neatly on her bedside table.

Beside her, Mako is still snoring gently, the moonlight falling over her in milky puddles, her arms wrapped around a stuffed bunny, an old gift Ryuko had gotten for her a year before. She manages a smile, pushing past the yellow curtains that look brown in the dark to step outside.

Satsuki got them a place that's far too nice. It offers a small balcony that lets her see the city sleeping, and she leans her hands over the cool metal of the rail, her feet still bare, her pajamas hardly covering her. She must look quite silly, standing out in the cold wearing nothing but the thin fabric of hand-me-downs that are too tight and midriff-baring and a red scarf wrapped clumsily around her neck, but even as the cold air washes over her and her breath leaves in delicate puffs, she doesn't feel much of anything, struggling to see the stars beyond all the lights, beyond this world of humans.

He'd never gotten to see the snow. It rarely falls around here, and a part of her had wanted to just take her bike and go where it does, to

show him what it's like. He'd certainly liked their little escapade to the beach, even if he couldn't stop telling her that she should have said something before they ran off and she should have let them know where they were going. A little color comes over her cheeks when she thinks of how jealous he seemed of that yellow bikini she'd bought just for the trip, but he'd laughed like she'd never heard him laugh that day, and she'd thought, they should do this more often, they should run off and forget the fighting and her dad and everything for a while and just have fun.

It never got to happen. Everything came up. She was too tired, the gas gauge on her bike still all busted-up, and they'd spent a snowless holiday inside that little one-room house. And surely it was the best she'd ever had, better than anything she could have ever even *imagined* after years of holidays spent alone in the dorms of her boarding school with nothing but the lame greeting cards her father sent that she never read, but she'd thought that next year, she'd make everything up to them, she'd make it better, she'd take them all out, they'd go see the snow, all of them, her and Mr. and Mrs. Mankanshoku and Mataro and Mako and…

Well, it's next year now, and she can't sleep. She hates that the holidays bring all this back to her, torture her with these thoughts and dreams that remind over and over of what she can never do, of what she'd messed up on and can never apologize for. Her eyes scan the sky for the stars, for Sirius, for anything that would assure her that she's silly for feeling like this and silly for standing out here like this and to tell her without any words at all that she's silly and it's okay and she should go back to sleep before she gets herself sick. But she can't see the stars, and she blames the lights rather than the tears that fall off her chin and onto hands now red with cold, and she holds the scarf closer, sneaking back inside with a quiet *click* of the balcony door, the cold stuck to her as she collapses into her sheets, never bothering to take the scarf off as she pushes a tearstained face into the huge mass of her fancy-hotel pillow that reeks of fancy-hotel perfume and fancy-hotel detergent and doesn't smell a bit like him.

When she's woken up in the morning by an overenergetic Mako, her pillow's damp and the scarf is still there, wrinkled and wrapped all around her, and she keeps to wearing it when they go out to see everyone as the sun drops down low and leaves the streets dark.

She stops as they get close. Snow falls from the sky, and they both stop without thinking, because Mako grew up in this town, and she swears that it's never snowed there, not like this, anyway, never, and distantly Ryuko hears the roar of a snow machine not-so-far-off. She looks up, towards the snow that's not-quite-snow but snow all the same, and she still can't see the stars but she feels like she can anyway as she holds her scarf close, smiling, listening to the dryer-whir of the machine.

A/N: Inspired by Sushio's 2015 Christmas comic.

Anywhere Else - Ryuketsu

Anywhere Else

It sucks being in different Houses.

It sucks having to haul her ass all the way up the Clock Tower, holding her robes close to try to keep from bleeding everywhere, and it sucks that they decided *this* to be the place she'd find him whenever she went looking.

The wooden stairs creak beneath her. She can scarcely breathe, and there are still so many damn steps to go. Maybe it'd just be better to go through all the effort to come up with something that'd get her right into the Hufflepuff dorms whenever she pleased to save herself from this, even if the Hufflepuff dorms sound like some kitschy, horrible nightmare from the way he tells it. But she could at least have fun with the challenge of sneaking in, she reasons to herself, forcing her legs up the last few steps. They say no non-Hufflepuff has gotten in there for a thousand bajillion years. There's a certain thrill to it.

But as she finally reaches the top, she knows he would never agree to try.

He never really fits in anywhere. He's too big even for someplace as big as Hogwarts… except in the Clock Tower. In the Clock Tower, he's just as small as everyone else, and even in the dim light, she can still see how at peace he is in his usual spot right by the window, looking out to the stars like he doesn't have a worry in the world.

It's a wonder that he doesn't hear her stomping up there like a behemoth, but it seems he doesn't, and he doesn't even look her way as she stumbles towards him.

"Hey, Fresh Blood," she whispers. It's the name *they* call him, but when she says it, it means something different. "Hey. Little help? You know I suck at this stuff…"

At the sound of her voice, he rushes to her without another word. She must look terrible. Her arms are cut up, her legs bruised, and she can hardly see out of her right eye anymore, the whole thing feeling warm, and bumpy, and swollen. But he doesn't cringe, or look away. He never does.

They're used to this by now. He keeps antiseptic and cotton swabs and ice packs in his robes, and they're out in moments as helps her to a seat and lights the tip of his wand to examine her wounds. It's all Muggle stuff and Muggle treatments, but after his attempt at healing magic sent him panicking out his ears and lost Gryffindor 30 points when she had to fess up about the fight, she figured it was best to suffer slowly like a Muggle than go through all *that* humiliation again. He never agreed, of course, always wanting her to go to Madam Pomfrey and get "certified" care, and she can see it even now in the way he looks at her as he works on her eye. It hurts like hell, but she bites her lip to keep from crying out, and he lets her squeeze his hand.

Then comes what always comes. He wishes she wouldn't do this. But does he know what they're saying about him? But it doesn't matter what they're saying about him. Just ignore it and move on. But she can't because it's not fair. But she should because he's worried. But she'll get stronger and stop them if she just keeps at it. But he doesn't want to see her hurt anymore.

It goes on and on. No one ever wins. It's exhausting. She could fall asleep right here, in his arms.

… she didn't just think that.

"Ryuko."

She looks up. It seems like he's finished. Every last scrape and cut is wrapped up with bandages that she'll be sure to cover with her robes come the morning, and he's shoving an ice pack in her hands, to put over her busted-up eye. She takes it, but her face still feels so hot.

No one ever wins. Tonight, though, maybe he doesn't want to.

"I want to know why," he says.

"Why what?" she asks.

"Why you bother. No one else would."

The ice pack falls off. Her fingers brush over the wound he'll never touch, the scarred-over bite on the top of her back. She knows full well that if people ever figured it out, if they put two and two together, they'd treat her just the same as they treat him.

So she says, "Monsters have to look out for each other, don't they?" She finds herself leaning against him. He wraps an arm around her. The stars look fantastic at this time of night.

"But you're not a monster," he says.

"And neither are you," she says back.

She sighs. She's so exhausted, and he's so warm. "I just have to make the rest of the world see that," she tells him. " *We* do."

"Yeah," he agrees. "But maybe there are better ways than your fist?"

"… okay, fine, maybe you're right."

She cracks a smile. He's so obnoxious, but she can say honestly that she doesn't want to be anywhere else at all.

A/N: A short fiction AU with the prompt, "Ryuketsu, Harry Potter AU."

Chichibu-Tama-Kai - Soichiro, Ryuko

Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park

When Soichiro Kiryuin comes home, he finds his daughter collapsed on the ground, and he sighs a great, tired sigh.

It's nearing the end of summer. There's a coolness to the evening air that whispers of fall, but tiny glimmers of the sun's dying glow still drench the hallway in a warm orange light without any care for how late it is, and he can still see perfectly his daughter's little hands clutching tight that pamphlet they received ages ago in the mail, some ad to go visit the Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park. She hasn't been able to let go ever since she first laid eyes on it, and tonight she holds the mountain trails close to her heart, clinging to it as though it's not a glossy piece of junk mail, but her most beloved stuffed animal with the fabric worn thin and the button eyes going loose.

Soichiro doesn't take off his jacket, or his shoes. He doesn't even bother to lock the door. He only leans down to scoop the tiny child up into his arms, walking her up the stairs, to her room, as quietly as he can.

It's the third time this week. In days that seem so long ago now, she'd be so excited when she heard the door open that she'd rush towards him full of energy, her arms outstretched as she grabbed onto his legs, and he, exhausted, patted her head, and swore that he was home, finally, and he was going to be there for her. But lately all that energy seems used up. She waits and waits at that door for him to come home, waiting for him to take her away to someplace he shouldn't, but that waiting gets to be too much, and she falls asleep right there, on the floor, holding on to that pamphlet like her life depends on it.

He curses the blasted thing. She's still clutching it tightly. By now it's so wrinkled and creased that the words are hard to make out, but he supposes that it's not the words that draw her to it. If it wouldn't break her heart, he'd throw the garbage straight into the shredder where it belongs, and let this all rest. No more coming home to an exhausted daughter on the floor. No more saying *no* all the time. No more seeing that resentment build up inside her, that hatred for a father who is never there, and never lets her leave.

But he still hasn't figured out all the science. He can't have her out in the world, not yet, not when anything could happen, and he can't have her forcing him to say these hard things. He's already pulled in so many different directions. It's too much to have this from her, too. It's not fair to him.

He pushes open her bedroom door. The damn thing still creaks, and she's jostled half-awake at the sound, calling out for him in sleep-weary whispers, mumbling a slew of mixed-up nonsense that he doesn't hear as nonsense, but as her desperate pleas that she wants to go, that she wants to see the mountains, and the hot springs, and to take the train and wear hiking shoes like the little girl in the picture, and visit the shrines. He's heard it all before, and it's all he hears now, over and over again, playing through his head when he needs to be working, needs to be plotting, needs to be doing *anything* but worrying about getting his daughter to some ridiculous, overpriced National Park.

He puts her in bed, slowly tugging away the pamphlet, placing it down on her bedside table so she would never think it gone, or that he'd stolen it. He pulls the covers over her, and kisses her forehead, right next to the red he'd given her, and he sighs another one of his great, deep sighs, sitting down on a child's rocking chair with his face in his hands.

Not fair to him! He wants to both laugh at himself and leap right out her window at the same time. Tomorrow morning he'll find her collapsed outside his bedroom door, holding on to that pamphlet again, and he'll have to put her back into bed, and place the

pamphlet beside her, and then come home to go through it all again, to keep telling her *no* . How she must hate him. And surely she has every right to.

Perhaps she hears his silent thoughts and silent regrets, because she sits straight up in bed, looking around her darkening bedroom with a tired understanding. She calls for him with that name he hates, and he's by her side in a moment, rising from the tiny little rocking chair that squeaks just as badly as her bedroom door to say that he's sorry, Daddy had a long day at work, but he's here now and he wants to fix her up something to eat.

She just reaches for her pamphlet, holding it out to him.

"Please, Daddy?" she asks. "Maybe not today or tomorrow, but-"

He puts the pamphlet back on the bedside table.

"You know Daddy's too busy to do that," he says. It's his excuse, but maybe it's the truth, too. He feels so tired, and he wishes she were back at that age when she didn't question things so much, and went with whatever he said. Now she's getting too smart for her own good. Now she knows that daddies shouldn't leave their little girls home alone for most of the day, and knows that it isn't normal to never leave this place. He's getting sick with worry that one day she's going to sneak out somehow, that she'll stack up his research books and climb over the fence he had constructed. He doesn't want to think about coming back and finding her not here. He doesn't want to think about having to search for a girl who shouldn't exist in the first place, not as she is now, not like this.

She cries. It's been a long time since he's had to deal with her out-of-this-world tantrums, but she hasn't forgotten how. She throws the pamphlet at his head. She screams that he's *always* too busy, and that it's not fair, that she wants to go past the yard and past this house, and she doesn't know why he keeps her in here all the time, all cooped up.

He has another excuse. "You know your condition," he says, as calmly as he can. "It will make you sick if you're outside too long."

"You don't know that," she whines. "You've never let me be outside at all!"

It's not true. He's taken her in the yard, and showed her all the plants and flowers. He's even built her a little swing on a tree, and in the days when she used to run to him with great exuberance when he came home, sometimes she'd be so distracted playing on it that she'd have to slam her feet into the dirt in order to come to him and hug him and welcome him back.

He fears the day she'll find all the holes in the logic. He fears the day she breaks his silly, *You can't be outside for more than three hours* rule and finds that she can and be perfectly fine for it. He fears she already has, and that's why she's making this ruckus, screaming at the top of her lungs, crying, yelling, just waiting for him to react, just waiting for a truth that he can't tell her.

He's glad they don't have any neighbors nearby to hear this.

Soichiro knows how best to calm her. He ignores her flaying arms, ignores that she could very well kill him right here and now, and wraps trembling hands around her tiny body, scooping her up into his arms. She doesn't fight back or stop him. Her cries quiet to tiny whimpers as he pats her back as he did when she was only an infant.

"Shh," he says. "You know I just want the best for you…"

The best for her. Isn't it just the best for him?

"You know I love you."

So much it hurts.

He walks out of the room, down the stairs. She's no longer yelling. She clings tightly to him now, clutching his shirt with her tear-stained hands, burying her face into it.

"I want to go to your National Park," he goes on, stepping into the kitchen. He puts her down by the table and opens the refrigerator to get something cooked for her to eat. "I really do. But I just don't think we can right now. Not until you're better, and I have more time."

She sniffs, but doesn't argue anymore. She knows well the story he told her, that when she was a baby, she got so sick from being outside this house too long that it was decided she'd have to stay in here, where it's safe, until she's older and this sickness is cured. It's all half-truths. He's the one who made her sick. He's the one who did this. And he's the one who's going to make it even worse, once he figures it out, once he…

He makes curry. She looks down at it and eats it with such little vigor and excitement that he can't stand it, and when she doesn't ask for him to read her a bedtime story that night, he lies in bed wide awake no matter his exhaustion, wondering and wondering if he *can't* have it all, if she can't have a normal childhood, if she can't have a normal Dad.

In the morning, when he sneaks back before she's awake, he doesn't find her crouched in front of his bedroom door anymore. She's fast asleep in her own bed, and she's thrown aside the pamphlet. It sits in the soft carpet, just as faded and ruined as the night before.

Gently, he shakes her awake.

"Next Saturday," he says. "We'll go. To Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park."

Her eyes light up, and she hugs him, screaming a million *thank you's* with sleep still in her eyes and exhaustion caught on her voice.

The train trip is expensive, but it's not like he can't afford it. He'd said he was going to do some research across the country and he'll be out a few days. His wife didn't so much as bat an eye at him when he mentioned it. She's suspicious, but not nearly suspicious enough. He still has some time left. At least a little.

He bought his daughter new hiking shoes like she wanted and a whole new outfit to go with it, and a pretty little sunhat with a red ribbon tied around it. He had her take fake "medicine" that would allow her to be outdoors a little longer than usual to keep up the ruse, but maybe it's at the point where he shouldn't bother anymore. She gives it no mind, and can't stop smiling as they get on the train taking her to where she wants to go so badly. Surely she's never seen so many people, and sights, and sounds. He's probably more afraid of what could happen than she is. She has an unreal giddiness to her, and can't stop saying thank you to her dad, the best dad in the world.

The train's not even started, and already he feels like throwing up. But he smiles for her.

When they stop, he pulls out the maps he'd gotten, asking where she wants to go, pointing to all the places the pamphlet advertised, explaining each one so that she would know. But she's not really listening to him. She just wants to run, and she runs on the trails without knowing where she's going, and he follows behind her, the maps flapping behind him like big gaudy wings, and she can't stop saying, Catch me, Daddy! Catch me!

He scoops her up in his arms, and she giggles, and when they come into the *ryokan* for the night after running across trails and looking at Mount Mitake all day, she says she's so happy, that her dad is spending so much time with her. He doesn't sleep well.

In the morning, they hit the trails again. She's as excited as ever, running and running wildly, her arms outstretched, the ribbon on her new sunhat flapping in the breeze. He chose a good time to come out, he thinks. The weather is beautiful, bright sun and blue skies

everywhere. He brought his nice camera to take pictures, but he's not so sure if he'll get the chance to snap any, not with all the energy she's got bottled up, and the way she won't slow down, not even as they climb higher and higher.

"Be careful," he tells her, struggling to keep up. He doesn't want her falling and scraping her knee, or getting hurt in any way at all. He supposes it's not so crowded-in fact they seem to be the only ones on this trail-but if anyone were to notice, he doesn't want to think about trying to come up with an explanation for it, and doesn't want to think about what will happen if too much attention gets drawn to them. All his hard work, for nothing. He shivers at the thought of her mother finding her. The things that woman would do, if she knew what had really happened four and a half years ago.

He quickens his pace.

She's stopped. She must have worn herself out, finally. She's breathing hard, her hands on her hat to keep it from flying away in the wind.

He gestures to his camera. "Would you like to take a picture?" he asks. He takes it off from its spot around his neck, holding it out in front of her. They're not in a particularly view-worthy area, but he won't miss the opportunity to further let himself believe he's a good father, making good memories that she'll remember for the rest of her life.

She takes the camera from him with tiny, untrained hands. Her photo turns out sideways and off-focus once it gets developed, but he always keeps it in his lab afterwards, hidden away in a little drawer. Over the years it gets worn with age, the back of the paper yellowed and the edges thinning, and once one of his coworkers sees it, and he says it's his daughter's first photo, she tells him he should put it in a frame, keep it nice. But he can't, and he doesn't, and when the whole place burns down, his daughter has no idea how close he kept it to him.

But there in the park, the camera back around his neck, he says, "When we get it developed, I'll put it in a frame, and hang it in our living room. What do you think?"

She smiles brightly.

They enjoy lunch there. No one else is around. She says she's glad, says that the entire Park is theirs today, and she leaves with her food half-finished, rushing further up the trail. He scrambles to his feet, chasing after her.

"Hey!" he calls, but she is boundless energy once more. "Be careful!"

She only laughs, looking behind her as she runs, saying that he's gonna have to catch her, that she's gonna get up to the top of this mountain, and then she'll take an even better picture to put in a frame.

She never does get the top.

She's too close to the edge. Her new shoes hang half-off the trail. Soichiro opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes, and he's silent, frozen in place, breathing hard as he watches the scene unfold too quickly in front of him.

She's too close to the edge, and she rolls and rolls and rolls, down and down and down.

It takes him nearly twenty minutes to get to where she is, and when he brings her in his arms, she is as silent as she was when he did this once before, four and a half years ago. Back then, she did not cry as he pulled her away, filthy and forever changed. Now, she does not cry as he holds her close, completely still, her new sunhat long gone, her clothes destroyed and torn, covered in mud and blood. Now, she does not move as he puts her on his back as though everything is alright, and as he hopes that no one will look closely enough to know that it is not. Now, she doesn't whisper a word as he

comes back into their *ryokan*, as he puts her into bed, cleaning her up so that she'll never know, throwing away her new hiking outfit so that she will never question it.

When she flutters her eyes open, she finds herself warm in her bed, completely uninjured. "Daddy," she says, sitting up, seeing him with his face in his hands. "Daddy, what happened? I was running, and then-"

"You just fell and scraped your knee a little," he cuts in, smiling the best way he can, but surely she can see the tears in his eyes. "But Daddy fixed you up with his magic. You're just fine. You're going to be just fine."

When she asks if he's going to be fine, he can't answer. He can't even look at her.

They leave the next morning after a quick breakfast, hardly exchanging any words at all, no matter how much she tugs on his shirt and calls for him, and how much her disappointment fills him with dread.

He throws himself into his research. He'll find *something* he can do, to seal them away, to make her normal enough to get her away from him, to keep him from getting distracted, and having second thoughts. He'll find something that will stop these constant reminders of what could have been, and the fact that it *can't* be, not now, not ever.

As soon as he figures it out, he sends her away to boarding school. When she screams and cries when he leaves her alone, he does not look back, and twelve years later, when she laughs in a time and place where he no longer exists, she does not falter when she quiets, when she says that he and her had never gotten along, that he was never much of a family to her at all.

And surely he would understand.

After all, it's easier, that way.

Latte - Ryuko, ?

Latte

She usually just gets her coffee to go, forgoing the fancy latte art that the shop is known for to get the stuff regular in a dull, undecorated paper cup. But then there are those *sometimes* and *occassionallys* and *every once in a whiles* where she decides she doesn't care for walking out the door with a cinnamon roll wrapped between plastic in one hand and overly-hot coffee clutched in the other, and she sits down in the shop instead, staring out the window.

Today is one of those days. She's got her usual cinnamon roll-the usual for whenever she decides to spend the money to come out here, that is-and it's on a little white plate today, speckled with red and yellow and blue flowers that remind her of spring, even though it's late fall, and the weather outside just as gloomy as that implies. She got the Streamer Latte, too, with two little hearts drawn in the foam. It's so pretty that Mako never drinks it 'til it's long cold, spending all her time staring and taking photos, always asking her to smile big, too. But she's not so sentimental, and has already scalded her tongue on the stuff. The two little hearts look more like broken pinwheels by now.

She puts down the mug with a light *clatter* . "I wasn't expecting you," she says.

She takes to looking out the window, to all the rain washing over the streets. It's a mess, especially with all those dead leaves littering the sidewalks. She's sure she's got plenty stuck to her shoes. Probably in her hair, too, and this overly-big jacket.

Of course he gets on her about the jacket.

"It was cheap," she says, shrugging. "Mako says it looks cute. Doesn't it?"

She laughs when he denies that it does, that it looks like she's melting beneath all that excess fabric.

"Well," she says, smiling at nothing, "you know I'm really bad at that whole "making you jealous" thing."

He's quiet. She shouldn't have said that. She changes the subject. She talks endlessly about how Mako's engaged now, and how the wedding is coming up soon, and she's going to be there, of course, she's already got a nice dress picked out, and she's sure that even *he* would think it looks good. She talks about her sister, about Nonon Jakuzure, about Shiro Iori and Uzu Sanageyama and Houka Inumuta. She talks about all the people they used to know together, and then some they didn't. She talks and talks and talks. Her latte is surely growing cold.

She feels the way he's staring at her. "What?" she asks.

And he says, You keep telling me about everyone else. But you have not told me much about yourself. I want to hear about *you* too, Ryuko.

And she laughs. Long and hard, and too loudly. She laughs over the music playing quietly in the café, laughs enough that the others in the shop turn to look at her with raised eyebrows or deep frowns or a strange sort of amusement.

"Well, I'm right here!" she says, and she wishes to touch him, to put her hand over his, just like she sees everyone else doing, just like maybe she's always wanted to do, at least once, just to try. "You can see I'm just fine."

Once more, he's quiet. She feels his eyes over her, over her cold latte with the drawn-in hearts now faded into nothing, over her overly-big jacket. She feels a sigh he doesn't voice, feels an

embrace that's impossible, feels him cry for her and the dark circles under her eyes and her uncombed mess of hair and the once-tight jeans that now hang loosely off her hips.

And then he's gone.

I Don't Make Messes - NuiJunketsu

I Don't Make Messes I Make Art

Her mother never loved her and early that morning she sat at a table outside her campus's biology building and used her purple-handled scissors to cut up the essay she hadn't written into magical shapes, humming a jolly little tune of her own imagining as the blank, white pieces drifted away in the wind. Only one of the dozens and dozens of hurried, gossiping, ugly students stopped to ask what it was she was doing and it was exactly the person she expected and he said exactly what she expected he'd say, not even looking to her as he remarked, Making messes as usual, and she didn't look to him either as she remarked back, Don't be silly I don't make messes I make *art*, and he leaned over and kissed her with a fierce intensity right then and pulled away with a look on his face that made her mind instantly skip back to what she'd heard the other girls mutter, that He'll use you and use you and then throw you away, but his feral, hungry stare only brought a wide, manic smile to her own lips as she kissed him again.

It must be afternoon, by now.

A/N: A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Nui/human!Junketsu, college AU."

Programmed Love - Ryuko, Senketsu

Programmed Love

Ryuko never thought it was a *good* idea, exactly, but it wasn't gonna be the end of the world.

Sure, the stupid thing cried too much, but he also *slept* too much, and she'd figured, Well, as long as he's asleep, nothing'll go wrong, and I won't have to deal with his tantrum later. She'd have done just as he wanted, so he couldn't get mad at her. It'd be *his* fault that he snoozed through everything.

Neither of them would really win, but neither of them would really lose, either. It was fair.

And maybe it would have worked, too, if she hadn't sat in her room 'til long after her roommate had already gone, pulling shirt after shirt from her closet, skirt after skirt. Maybe if she hadn't laid potential outfits out on her bed, and hadn't stood in front of her (roommate's) big mirror, and hadn't held the clothes up against herself as she considered and reconsidered, and hadn't decided last minute on the tackiest thing she owned in a great huff as she thought of his endless tears, then maybe she would have had time to eat before the first bell rang, and maybe she wouldn't be sitting here now, swearing in her mind (even though she's not supposed to know how to swear), a sound filling up the room that's louder than her teacher's lecture and louder than a helicopter and louder than even her dad's music on the nights he worked too hard.

She hears a faint sneeze she knows far too well, her heart stops beating, and she knows in an instant that there's no way she can pay attention to this lesson anymore.

He sneezes again. It's what he always does when he wakes, as though he can't even handle this world he's been thrown into. She tenses up as he looks all around-at the students sitting beside her, at the teacher in the front of the room, out the window where all is drab and gray. She tenses up even more as she feels his eye on *her.*

"What was that noise?" he asks right away, before even a *good morning* or *hello,* a hint of worry in his tone, though he's surely aware that there's nothing to worry about, and that she is perfectly fine . If they were alone, Ryuko would coo and pat his eye and tell him very gently that she was all right and all was all right (because, for reasons she can't understand, he always seems to cry the most over matters concerning her, and she would *not* want to deal with the sogginess that comes with his fits), but they are not alone, and she instead feels a great irritation build up inside her.

He hasn't bothered to keep his voice down. He doesn't have to. But she does, and she tries her hardest to calm herself, to stay cool.

She sighs.

"I'm hungry," she whispers. "That's all." She feels like everyone's looking at her, their eyes stuck on this weirdo who's talking to herself. She sinks down lower in her chair, her face burning red. She should just ignore him, she thinks. Stay calm. Be quiet. Pay him no mind. Things can still be okay. It's not the end of the world.

But his curiosity is endless. "Your stomach makes noises like that when you're hungry?" he asks. He's quiet a moment, as though thinking that over. "Do you think mine does, too?"

Just ignore him. He squeaks out her name when she doesn't answer, over and over again. She wishes she couldn't hear him, just like everyone else can't. She wishes she could just pay attention to whatever the teacher's saying. She wishes she were anywhere but here. The clock never seemed slower.

This wasn't just a not-so-good idea, she thinks, her hopes fading. It was a *bad* idea, and now it's all falling apart.

"Can't you see I'm in class right now?" she finally asks. Nobody else is talking but the teacher, she wants to add, but it's like all eyes are on her, and she doesn't want to say anything more.

"Are you supposed to be doing something?"

He really doesn't know anything. Especially not human decency. This was the worst plan. She should have just dealt with his crying over her not wearing him later, no matter how awful *that* is.

"It's rude to talk when other people are," she manages to say. "So can you please be quiet?"

He looks up at her like he's embarrassed. It's a wonder he hasn't figured this sort of thing out already.

"But those two girls over there have been talking the entire time," he argues.

"They're being rude!" It's a bit louder than a whisper. A few people glance over-at least, it *feels* like they do, anyway.

"So we're being rude right now?" he asks.

"Yes!"

"Oh."

He's finally quiet. She could fall over in relief. The words the teacher keeps saying seem to make sense again, start sounding like real language once more. She sits up straighter, looks ahead with wide, alert eyes. Maybe this won't be so bad after all. Maybe it'll be okay. Maybe it's really *not* the end of the world yet.

And then she farts. In front of *him.*

A thousand years pass. She dies and comes back to life. The world falls in on her and crushes her 'til she can't breathe.

"Ryuko," he gasps. "I know it's rude, but… what was *that?"*

And she's had *enough.*

She clenches her fists. She pushes her chair back. She stands as the *creak* of its metal legs fill the air and all eyes fall on her.

"I farted, okay?!"

The entire class laughs. The world comes rushing back in, and Ryuko is hit with the sudden, sickening realization that she has not only announced to *him* that she just let one during class, but *everyone.* A part of her wants to laugh at the absurdity. The other, greater part wants to sink into the floor and disappear forever.

Her classmates are all *really* staring at her now. Time has stopped, and trapped her in this moment for an eternity, where all these eyes are watching and laughing and pointing and judging. The teacher frowns, that same, horrible, disapproving glare that Ryuko is all too used to seeing from her father directed straight at her. Her throat feels scratchy and sore. Her eyes burn.

"Well, thanks to Miss Matoi," the teacher starts, "I'm assigning…"

Ryuko doesn't stay to hear the rest. She's out of the room in moments, rushing down the halls, her face wet with tears. She knocks over her chair on the way and forgets her bag, and she doesn't know where she's going, but it doesn't matter. She leaves the very building, rushes past the playground, past the baseball diamond. She runs until she can't anymore, falling against a tree as she holds herself close and cries and cries and cries.

"Look what you made me do!" she says. She wishes she could pull him away. She wishes she could go back in time, back to this morning, back before she ever decided that *this* was the best

decision she could make. "Everyone's laughing at me! I'm just a *joke.* Nobody will want…"

She coughs and splutters. She doesn't say the rest, that her dad was right all along, and that she should never have even tried.

He's unusually silent.

All he says, after she's worn herself of crying, is a sorrowful, "I'm sorry."

The chair's too soft for what it is, but not soft enough so that she could sink so far down into it that no one could see her anymore, and she could be invisible. And she knows, too, that if she were to slip away, they'd just find her again, and bring her back here. They'd probably already called her dad.

It'd be comforting, if it meant he'd take her home. But he never would. Not now. Not ever.

She sinks down further.

The lady in front of her has Ryuko's bag set on the counter. Her hair's tied up in a frosty bun, and she's not smiling, not even a little. If Ryuko could disappear, right then, right there, she would.

"Miss Matoi," the lady says, peering down with a pointed look. "I understand that it's difficult to be away from home, but surely you know this kind of behavior is unacceptable."

Ryuko doesn't move, and doesn't say a word.

"Are you trying to gain attention?" the lady asks. "This is not the way to do it. What would your mother think? Do you think she would be proud to learn that her daughter was known as the class clown? That her scores were pitiful? The poor woman would die of shame."

"I don't have a mom." It's all Ryuko can think to say.

"Everyone has a mother," the lady says swiftly. "And what do you think would cross her mind, to see you here, like this?"

"She wouldn't care."

"Do you really think that?"

Of course I do, Ryuko wants to say. Her father doesn't care. Why would her mother be any different?

Instead, she says nothing.

"Let me tell you something, Miss Matoi," the lady says. "Here at Ox Academy, we pride ourselves on the integrity of our students. We all work together to create a better tomorrow. You wouldn't want to be the one stopping this beautiful image, would you?"

The lady places the bag back in Ryuko's hands. She answers the question herself. "Of course you wouldn't! I've notified your father of your behavior, and he agrees that it would be best for us to keep an eye on you. Be aware that the next time this happens, there will be more than just a simple talk."

Ryuko doesn't say anything else, and the lady leads her back to her room. Her roommate offers a reassuring smile as she steps inside.

"Be good," the lady says. The door shuts, and Ryuko looks to the girl beside her.

"Rough day, huh?" she asks.

Ryuko nods dumbly.

"It's okay," the girl says. Her gaze falls over all her things, to the shelves filled with pretty picture books, and sports' trophies, and seashells from vacations, and framed family photos with a mother and a father and then she herself, smiling big into the camera.

"We're all here because our parents hate us. None of these grown-ups get that. They're mean."

Ryuko nods again. Her roommate calls her parents every night, and they exchange *I love you's* and laugh and wish each other goodnight.

Ryuko's dad has never once replied to any of her messages.

But she nods.

"Yeah," she says.

That night, when her roommate has fallen asleep, and she's warm in her pajamas, Ryuko brings their phone down to the floor-where she swears it's quieter and she won't be so bothersome-and calls her dad again.

"I want to go home," she says, softly, after the beep. "Please, Dad. Please? I miss you."

She waits there all night, waiting for a response that never comes. In a half-asleep stupor she hears her roommate get up and leave to enjoy the day off, and she thinks she also sees *him* come down to where she is. She thinks she sees him struggle to pull the blanket off her bed, and thinks she sees him drape it across her shoulders, but it's really a ridiculous thing, and when she fully wakes up in the early afternoon, she can't imagine how she's wrapped up warm on the floor.

Ryuko can feel his eyes- *eye* -on her as she stares out the window. She still hasn't gotten dressed, or combed her hair, or gone down to the halls to get anything to eat. She must look terrible. He should look somewhere else. Anywhere else.

He doesn't.

"Aren't you going to go outside with them?" he asks. There are girls playing in the courtyard with bright pink and yellow chalk, skipping and laughing. There's a group kicking around a red rubber ball. One girl has mud all over her skirt, and a boy must have fallen down at one point, because there's grass in his hair, and green streaks across his arms. All the swings are full of kids.

Ryuko shakes her head.

"Why not?" he asks.

He's sincere in his question, but it doesn't make her feel any better. She doesn't know why her father thought this was a good idea. Was it supposed to be comforting, to have something scarcely more than an imaginary friend to keep her company? Was it supposed to be kind, to have to be a big sister to someone who doesn't know anything?

"I don't have any friends," Ryuko tells him. Because of you, she wants to say, but she holds her tongue. She closes the curtains so she doesn't have to look outside anymore. "That's why I'm not going out there."

"But isn't that girl in here your friend?" he asks.

Ryuko shakes her head. "She just talks to me. That doesn't mean we're actually friends. She has real friends, anyway."

She stands and opens her bag. She should be practicing her *hiragana.* The others would just get behind while they waste time outside. She flips through her workbook, opening up the next page she hadn't written in yet. *Sa, shi, su, se, so.* She runs her pencil over the lines.

"What are you doing now?" he asks.

"Homework," she answers. "I'm learning how to write." He's so annoying, but she can't help but feel a burst of pride when she says

it. Soon she'll be able to read all her picture books by herself. She already knows so many characters, and she's learning more and more.

He comes over to look. Her lines are crooked when she tries to write the characters without any guide, but she still thinks they look nice. She lets him see. At the top of the page, she writes the characters she already knows quite well-the ones for her name.

"Ma-to-i Ryu-u-ko," she says, pointing. "Daddy taught me that before I came here. Pretty cool, huh?"

He tries to nod, but something like him can't accomplish that too much. So he says, "Your name looks pretty."

She's flattered by the compliment. She's practiced a lot to get it to look this good. She returns to practicing the new characters-she's on *so* now-and he continues to watch. After she's drawn over the lines ten times and it's time to practice without any guide, he pulls on her pajama top to get her attention.

"Do you think…" he asks, shyly, "… do you think *my* name looks pretty, too?"

She puts down her pencil. "You don't have a name," she says. "Daddy never gave you one."

It's true. He'd been sleeping, back when she'd first gotten him, and he was presented as nothing more than tacky parting gift-just an outfit her father had made, nothing more. Her dad had him folded up nicely when he came into her hands. The fabric was soft, and smelled different than any other clothes she had, like the usual citrus of their laundry detergent, but also something strange that she couldn't pin down, like the way foggy mornings would smell back at home, or the scent of those yellow weeds that her dad always cursed. She never would have known that one day the clothes would wake up and see her and never leave her alone. She never would have known that he was *more* than just some awful thing her father

gave her that she never intended to wear ever, not even when her father said that this thing would be her friend, and that it'd keep her safe while she was away.

Her dad was just making fun of her. *Of course* he would think that she couldn't make any friends on her own. She feels her face turn very red at the thought. Before *he* woke up, she was going to prove her father wrong. She was going to be the most popular girl at school. Everyone would love her.

Now there was no chance.

She hears a soft "Oh," and looks over to see her clothes crying silent tears. He's usually quite loud, so while it's certainly a change of pace, she can't help the flood of irritation that fills her.

"Oh, suck it up already!" she says. She slams her workbook shut. "Only *people* get names. And animals. Not clothes. It's not like it's personal."

He sniffs. His crying doesn't stop. It only gets worse, and he hiccups in all his attempts to keep silent. She opens her workbook up again. She needs to practice. She should just ignore him. But her *so* looks more like a *sa,* and she forgets the stroke order, and he's hiccuping and sniffing out of control, so she says, aghast, "Fine! Here's your name."

He looks expectantly, but she doesn't really know all the characters. She scribbles on the edge of her paper like she's an expert, making one character completely from her own imagination, and another surely only partially based in reality. *"Se-i-fu-ku,"* she says. " *Uniform.* That's your name."

He lightens up immediately.

"It *does* look pretty!" he cries.

He wraps his sleeves around her in thanks. She wants to push them away, but she doesn't. He's warm, and he smells strange, but somehow, it reminds her of home.

The door opens without any warning. Her roommate steps inside, smiling wide, only for it to fall and be replaced with a frown and a raised eyebrow as she lays eyes on Ryuko and her uniform.

"Why are you hugging your clothes?" she asks, shutting the door behind her. She smells like outside, and has bits of leaves and grass stuck in her dark hair.

Ryuko throws Uniform to her bed. "No reason," she says, smiling, and somehow she manages to keep smiling as Uniform sniffles quietly at her pushing him away.

Her roommate frowns a little deeper, but shrugs soon enough, heading towards her desk. She sits down with a huge sigh, as though filled with relief.

"You should have been there, Matoi," she says. "It was *incredible.* You would never believe…"

She notices Ryuko's open workbook.

"You were doing *homework?"* she asks. "On your day off?" She puts her legs up on the desk. Mud falls off her shoes, and she leans back. "Sheesh, Matoi. You've got the rest of your life to be boring like that. No need to start now."

Ryuko flushes, closing the workbook with a gentle *slam.* "Yeah, I guess I couldn't help myself," she says, laughing awkwardly.

Her roommate frowns some more. "It's weird your parents hate you so much. My mother would *love* if I were like that."

She hops off the chair after only a moment of sitting on it. "Anyway. I'm going to get some lunch. I was gonna ask if you wanted to come,

but…" She looks up and down at Ryuko, still unkempt and unprepared for the day. "Maybe another time."

Ryuko nods. "Yeah, maybe later," she says.

Her roommate leaves without another word. Ryuko rolls her eyes at Uniform still sniffling on her bed, and stands up with a groan.

"Oh, shut up!" she says. "I don't even know what you're so upset about."

He cries, now. Full-out crying. Loud and horrible, getting tears all over the bed. She sighs, deeply.

"Hey," she says, coming close to him. "Shh. It's okay." She holds him close, the way her father used to when she cried, patting his back… if you can really call it that. "Don't cry."

She feels him wrap his sleeves around her, crying into her chest.

When she hangs him up for the night later that evening, after her roommate has returned and talked for ages to her parents and exchanged their usual *I love you's* and best wishes, Ryuko can't help but pull him down again after hours of being unable to sleep and hours of trying to get her own dad to pick up.

Uniform doesn't look like he was asleep, either, and doesn't sneeze upon finding himself in her arms.

"Ryuko?" he asks.

She blushes, holding him close as she heads back to her bed. Her daddy used to let her sleep beside him when she got scared, but then he stopped letting her in, saying that she was a big girl, and she shouldn't be clinging to her father all the time.

She's not scared now. But there's a feeling bubbling up inside her, the kind she remembers from the nights her dad would be too busy to read to her, or when her stuffed animals no longer seemed so

comforting anymore, or when her father had left her here and didn't even look back, and holding Uniform makes her feel a little better, she thinks, so she holds him, collapsing on her bed.

"You don't mind, do you?" she asks, pulling the covers over him.

He tells her *no.*

And so they fall asleep like that, a girl beside a school uniform in a school that doesn't have uniforms, drooling all over her sheets, snoring loud.

When Ryuko wakes in the morning with her blanket half-off her body and Uniform next to her, she can't help but feel her face burn red.

Surely she's too old to be needing what's essentially nothing more than a stuffed animal to help her get to sleep. Surely she's a big baby, and the silliest person in the whole school.

But she's never seen Uniform sleep so soundly, either, and she pulls the blanket further over the both of them.

Her roommate leaves without so much as a word.

When Ryuko returns to school, no one wants to sit next to her, so she sits alone, in the back of the room, and keeps her head down. He asks if she's okay, but she doesn't answer.

Class seems to go on forever. All around her she hears the whispers of the kids who *do* have friends, talking about what they're going to do when class is done, and that maybe they should ask Mia to come around, and have you heard from Fumiko lately? They laugh when the teacher talks, so quietly that the front of the room surely can't hear, but *she* can, and her heart races from jealousy, and her face burns from embarrassment.

After all, none of them would even think to talk to *her.*

She eats her lunch alone, outside where no one else is around, away from the playground, and away from anywhere else that *normal* kids would be.

Uniform asks again if she's okay, but this time she eats her *udon* instead of saying anything back. He sighs a long sigh, falling asleep against her.

Going back to class feels like torture after all that, but she goes, and she tries at listening. Maybe if she can't be the most popular girl in school, she can at least be the smartest. She drinks in every word, but she hears the students whispering behind her, and when her teacher calls on her-for surely she is remembered as a troublemaker who need *always* be called on-she gets nervous, and the answers don't come, and the teacher says, If you paid more attention in class, this wouldn't be so difficult, and the students behind her giggle, until they get assigned more homework for Ryuko's own ineptitude. She feels everyone's glare. She almost wishes Uniform were awake, so that at least *he* would be on her side, but on and on he snores.

When it's all over, she can only think, in despair, that it's just Week 2.

Ryuko hears her roommate talking to her parents, when she heads back, and she curses in a way that a child should not, because she wanted to go in her room, hang up Uniform, and cry until she had no tears left. She couldn't do that with her roommate there. No way would anyone get to see her cry.

So she turns to leave, to go somewhere else to sob her eyes out like she used to before her father said she was too old, and she should stop crying so much, she's a big girl, but she gets stuck on what her roommate's saying, and she stays put, standing right outside the door.

"Oh, she's a real weird one," her roommate says, so casually. Ryuko can hear her twirling the phone wire between her fingers, and her foot tapping against the wall. She always likes to be on the phone

with her face up to the ceiling and her arms falling off the sides of her bed, feet up high by the front. Ryuko can't help but find it a silly way to have a conversation, but then, it surely must also be silly to fall asleep on the floor waiting for your father to call, so she never says anything about it, just as her roommate never says anything to her about the nights she's spent not sleeping on her bed, but crumpled up in a pathetic heap where feet are supposed to go.

"She got in trouble in class for making a ruckus," she hears her roommate go on, and Ryuko's heart thuds on a little faster at the words. "You'll never believe it-it looked like she was just… talking to herself. Got sent down to the office and everything, all within the first week."

Ryuko feels her face heat up. There's a pause in the conversation. She doesn't want to imagine what her roommate's parents are saying on the other end.

"Mm-hmm," the girl says, after a time. "Yeah. But I have a theory, right? I think she's *talking to her clothes."* Another pause. The girl laughs and laughs and laughs. "You'll never believe it. I think there's something seriously wrong with her. She was hugging her uniform last night like it was a stuffed bear or something."

Ryuko won't stay to hear anymore. She runs from the place, keeping her head down as she holds back her tears. She runs past the dorm rooms, and past the playground, and past the place where she had sat all alone for lunch that day instead of trying to be with anyone else, straight into the bunch of trees that surround her school. There's hardly a path in there, and surely she's not supposed to *be* in there, but she pushes past the branches, running and running and running, getting sticks in her hair and mud on her knees when she falls, and it's surely no wonder, that Uniform wakes up in a frenzy, sneezing furiously as he tries to call her name.

"Your heart is beating extremely quickly!" he says, but she doesn't listen as she keeps running. "Are you all right?"

She doesn't answer, falling down against a tree, collapsing into soil that is still damp from the rain they'd gotten the night before. He gasps at the coolness of it, crying out about what could possibly be the matter, to act like this, and dirty him so?

She doesn't say, then, that she blames him for everything. She doesn't say that it's all *his* fault she's a freak of nature, and that she can never be the most popular girl at school. She just cries and cries and cries, the tears soaking into his fabric.

He says, once more, "I'm sorry."

Ryuko's roommate doesn't bother to tell her the news until the day has come and there's a small moving team in their room, piling stuff out in boxes to go who-knows-where else.

Ryuko comes in to find her roommate sitting on her bed, a big smile on her face as she kicks her legs and she tells the movers where to put this and that, and what she expects from them.

"What's going on?" is all Ryuko can think to ask. It comes out of her mouth before she really processes the whole scene. It looks like everything's being stolen away, even though her roommate is quite content up on her bed, smugly watching over the whole operation.

"Oh," Roommate says, and her smile falls into something else. It's not quite sad, but not quite happy, either. "Well, I told my mama about you, and she said that you don't seem like a very suitable roommate for me."

She must notice Ryuko's shocked face, because she goes on, "Oh, don't take it personally. My mama is very hard to please. You'll never believe how many schools she looked at before she picked this one, you know? It's nothing personal. My mama just doesn't like me rooming with delinquents, that's all."

"Delinquent?" Ryuko repeats.

The girl laughs. "Well, what else can you call yourself?" She hops off her bed, shaking Ryuko's hand like they're not little girls in elementary school, but business partners. "It's been nice rooming with you, Matoi," she says. "See you around, I suppose."

Ryuko hadn't decided to wear Uniform that day, and she's glad, for surely he would feel how hard she struggles not to cry, as she sits on her own bed, and watches the scene before her. The movers take all the rest out in what feels like only minutes. They don't acknowledge her when they leave, keeping the door wide open, as though giving the rest of the world free reign to look upon the empty bed beside her, and to know that she was so unbearable that her roommate's mother had her moved out in only a matter of days.

Ryuko shuts the door herself, and falls face-first to her sheets. She would cry, but she feels no tears, no sadness, no regret. She feels only hatred.

She rises from her bed in a daze, ripping open her closet. Uniform sleeps there-not quite so soundly as the night she had him sleep beside her, but soundly all the same. She can hear his snores from where she stands-snores that stop and turn into sneezes as she yanks him from his hanger. He yelps in surprise.

"Are we going somewhere?"

She doesn't answer. Her pink blouse and jeans fall in a pile to the ground. She pulls his sleeves over her arms, and adjusts the skirt.

"Do you like being worn by me?" she asks. It's a serious question. Her father told her to always wear this thing, but she knew her father would never consider how Uniform felt about the whole situation. She had always figured-though she could not understand why-that he *adored* it when she wore him, because, after all, he always begged her to, and had cried endlessly when they first truly met and she swore that she would wear whatever she wanted, and she would never want to wear *him.*

But maybe he never cared one bit about her. Maybe he only liked what she could *do* for him. Maybe she was nothing more than a way of seeing the world.

Uniform's cries break through her thoughts. These are the big, loud, ugly tears he cried when she first brought him here. His fabric soon becomes very soggy, and she curses.

"Of course I do!" he says, through his sniffling. "You're my favorite in the whole world!"

Ryuko blushes, biting down on her lip so hard that she tastes blood. His favorite? When everyone else has found her so terrible that they have abandoned her? When no one else wants to be her friend?

Of course, she thinks. He's just like those talking toys, the ones whose stomachs you squeeze and they say all that crap that they're programmed to, stuff about how much they love you, and how great you are. They don't have any *real* feelings for the people they're spouting all that junk at. Her father really did think she couldn't do anything on her own. This thing was just programmed to love her, but even worse, it's all *his* fault that she's alone and hated in the first place.

She throws him off as quickly as she'd put him on. He doesn't understand, but he's not crying anymore-he's instead asking, as he always does, if she's all right, and what's going on?

Ryuko doesn't answer. She refuses to look his way.

"This is all *your* fault," she says, finally. They're the words that have been begging to be spoken ever since she first came to this school, and he first ruined absolutely everything for her.

He still doesn't understand. "What's my fault?" he asks, all innocence. She hates the sincerity in his voice. She hates how kind he sounds. He was just designed that way. It shouldn't be so convincing.

She gestures to the half-empty room-mostly empty, actually, because her roommate was the one who made the room feel alive. *She* had bookcase after bookcase, and sports' trophies sitting up on shelves, and framed family photos with a mom and a dad and a smiling little girl. She had tiny seashells from the beach, and a big jewelry box that would sing if you twisted the knob on its side, and a giant mirror she'd put up on the wall that Ryuko could see from her own side of the room sometimes, if she stood in just the right spot. She had stuffed animals and jump ropes and video games, and a whole TV to herself.

Ryuko? Ryuko had one bookshelf, and a dresser with one picture of her and her dad-which she kept face down, anyway. No use reminding herself that he would never pick up. No use reminding herself that he abandoned her here, with this *thing* that would love her no matter what she did, and would adore her simply because he was forced to.

She swallows hard. "She left because I'm a freak," she explains, slowly, her voice all venom. She hates how nasty she sounds, but she can't stop it, so she keeps going. "She left because I'm no good, and the reason I'm no good is all because of you!"

He doesn't cry, not now. He just looks at her with his one eye.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Yeah, you should be," she says back.

No other words come. She stares and stares and stares, and he stares and stares and stares back.

Eventually, she puts on her clothes she'd left on the floor-with her shirt inside-out-and leaves him there, all alone.

Ryuko spends a long time by herself. The weather outside is all murky and gray-the kind of weather that keeps kids inside. So the

best place to be alone is to go out in the gloom.

She doesn't bother with a rain jacket. She doesn't bother with rain boots, either. She's covered in mud by the time she gets to the tree that she's deciding to call her favorite spot, and she covers herself in more of it as she sits down, and cries with the sky.

She decides to come back to her room once the weather clears up, and she's grown worn of feeling sorry for herself. She passes by the playground and she thinks that maybe she was too hard on him, that it's really not his fault that he was made for her by her father, and she shouldn't have yelled at him like that. She thinks of all the times he stayed by her side as she cried, and thinks of how he had never once laughed at her, and how he had never thought her a joke, or a delinquent. She passes by the dorms she lives in and paces back and forth, back and forth, filthy and probably looking like quite a sight, and she thinks some more that she should apologize, that it's her dad she should be mad at, not the result of what he did.

So she comes into her room ready to say that she's sorry, ready to say that she shouldn't have said all that, and it's really not his fault, not really, but she opens her door to find that no one is there. He doesn't sit on the floor where she left him, and she riffles through her closet to find that he's not there, either, and it's only after she's searched through every last garment she owns that she sees the note he's left on her bed.

It's all scribbles. None of it makes a bit of sense. Child's markings, nothing more-even the name she had given him is nothing like what she had falsely told him was right.

The only thing he managed to write correctly is the *hiragana* of her name, and the letters stare back at her with sad, wobbly emotion.

She crumples the note up in her hands, and she's out the door again in moments.

A part of her can't even fathom that a sailor uniform would be able to go anywhere at all, but she wanders down all the hallways, and she can't find him, and she wanders right outside her building, and he's not there, either, and fear clutches her heart as she thinks to her herself that she can't imagine where he would have gone, and she wanders off into oblivion to find him.

She goes past the playground, and her favorite spot in the trees where she likes to sit alone, and then she circles back and tries again, and that's when she sees it.

The weather had cleared up, so there was no reason to stay inside so much anymore. Others had already come outside to enjoy the slightly-warm weather while it lasted (though they still wore jackets), and she sees a group kicking around a red rubber ball, and another playing hopscotch, and doing the things that people with friends do. But she also sees a group of them doing something not-so-normal.

They're kids she's seen from her class. They always sit in the back of the room, gossiping instead of paying attention to the teacher. There are four of them, and she thinks if she tries she might remember their names-the teacher picks on them almost as much as she picks on her-but when she catches sight of them, their names and their topics of usual gossip are the very last things on her mind.

She sees them doing something that leaves her heart cold and her stomach sick.

She sees them picking up Uniform.

"Oh, Matoi," one of the boys says, as she approaches them with a speed she didn't know she had. "We saw that you seem to have forgotten your uniform out here, and we thought we might do you a favor and destroy this thing so you start acting like a normal person, you know?"

She doesn't even blush at the accusation. So it seems her roommate's "theory" had been spread around. The thought of her

roommate sitting coolly on her bed and saying all that crap about *nothing personal* and *I'll see you around* fill her with rage. She bunches up her hands into fists. She's never fought anyone before, but the looks of these kids all smiling at her smugly just as her roommate did when she threw all her stuff out and left without so much of an *I'm sorry* or *It's not your fault* makes her all the more ready to try.

"I'm not a normal person," she says, through clenched teeth. "So just let him go."

They turn to each other and laugh. *"Him?"* a boy repeats, looking to his friend beside him, a girl who resembles Ryuko's roommate who had left her what feels both like an eternity ago but also like not so very long ago at all.

"Yes, *him,"* Ryuko repeats. "I don't want to ask again."

It's the sort of thing she's heard gangsters say in her father's movies that she wasn't supposed to watch. She hopes it makes her sound cool, but they just keep smiling at her. One boy-she thinks his name is Sato from what she knows from her classes-pulls out a pair of red-handled scissors from his pockets.

"I think this is getting to dangerous levels," he says, laughing with the others beside him. "I think we should cut it up before it gets any worse!"

He laughs some more. The others laugh with him, laughing as he presses the scissors up and down, up and down, as the *slice* of their blades fill the damp air. She hears cries of *You're right!* and *That sounds like a good idea!* She doesn't wait to hear any more.

She tackles the boy with the scissors. She rams right into him, pounding his face with her fist. The others come for her, too, but she knocks them away, focusing all her attention on this *asshole* -she's not supposed to know that word-who would dare tear up the only thing in this world who cared about her, whether he truly meant it or

not. Reality seems to fade away as she attacks, as she lands blow after blow, as she hears the others trying and failing to pull her away, as her fists start to hurt, and it's only when Sato pushes himself away and stands and wipes the blood from his lip that she beat up that she stops, her breathing hard.

"Jesus Christ," he says, breathing just as hard, looking at her like she's a monster out of a horror movie. "I don't care that much! Take your goddamn uniform."

He throws Uniform back to her, glaring at her like the freak she must truly be, and all of them walk away as though nothing had ever happened.

Ryuko picks Uniform off the ground gently, holding him close. He's very still, and very quiet, and neither of them say a word as she walks back to her room, and as she takes off her muddy shoes, and as she sits on her bed, still in her muddy clothes, still hugging him tightly.

"I'm sorry," she says, finally, when they're all alone, and surely there is nobody who could look upon them and laugh. "It's not your fault. I shouldn't have yelled at you."

He's still quiet. She fears that somehow she's lost him, that those kids killed him already without her knowing. She hugs him tighter.

"You're my only friend here, you know that?" she asks. Maybe it is all a lie that he was designed to fulfill, but it doesn't change the fact that she cares about him.

He reacts to that. She feels his sleeves wrap around her as he returns the hug. She would expect him to cry, but he's not crying now, as they hold each other close.

"And friends should have real names," she says. She looks to the blood that's gathered on her fists from the fight. She must have hurt that boy much more than she ever meant to. The red is dripping on

the fabric of her uniform, but it seems to fade away instantly, as though nothing had dirtied him at all.

And she says that Fresh Blood seems like a good name, don't you think?

A/N: Thank you to the Anon and SirriusTheMoonblade for your comments and support thus far!

To answer the question of prompts: I am more than happy to take them, though I can't guarantee any quickness in completing them. (But I'll get to them, I swear!) That said, I've got over 100,000 words of drafted Kill la Kill *short stories, so there is a lot more material to come…*

310 1 12 - Mako, Ryuko, Senketsu, Sats

310 1 12

She wishes she could think.

She wishes she could say what crossed her mind, because the question must have been asked, probably, maybe, but she can't really hear so much anymore, and she definitely can't see.

But if she could move her lips, and if the hand that's reaching up to hold a face that's not her own, that's wet with tears (is it truly?), that's warm and trembling… well, if that could be enough, and if that could convey everything she had believed, then…

She doesn't know. Her hand slips. She coughs and shudders, everything sore, everything burning.

She wishes she could think.

She saw two options, you know?

If she were lucky, and her timing just right, the blood would not seem to be hers, and all would be saved, and all would be fixed. She'd win. Things would return to how they were. The one she loves would be all right. Happy. Smiling, always. Too good for her, anyway. Too good.

Or she could accomplish nothing. It could all be for naught, a pitiful effort, a wasted dream.

But even then, she knew, she'd win, too. She'd save herself from a world she could never live in anymore, where all is wrong and ugly and not as it should be. A world where she could do nothing more.

So of course I went for it, she wants to laugh, wants to cry, wants to sing as all stare, as all is so deathly, horribly silent. There was nothing to lose! Nothing to fear! She'd run without hesitation, and jumped without pause, and she'd do it again in a heartbeat, because no matter what, she'd win.

She never expected anything else, because how could she have ever expected that *she* were enough?

One look at that face, and she doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Shock, or maybe horror… she can't tell what it is, that expression. Everything's fuzzy and blurry. Nothing makes sense. It feels like it's raining out of nowhere, but she knows it's not rain.

Is it funny, that a person could be so blind? Or is it just sad?

It doesn't hurt. It happens too quickly for that. Hardly more than a second, really. A gasp, and it's done. Over.

What hurts, well, that's what comes *after*, when the Realization sets in.

Because she thinks she's done it, at first. The day is saved. The mask breaks, the light comes back, it's miraculous, beautiful-it worked against all odds! Ryuko, *her* Ryuko, the one who saved her and stood up for her and always smiled for her… she's back. She's back, and she's staying back, for good, and it's all 'cause of this sacrifice, this rescue, this grand heroic deed.

Except not.

It feels so endlessly *slow* to come to know that it's all wrong. Someone else is suddenly standing there instead, dropping her weapon, opening her mouth as though to say something, but nothing comes. It's so deathly quiet. It's so *slow* .

The last thing Mako hears is a scream. The last thing she sees is the Ryuko who is Ryuko but not, collapsed on the ground, shaking and shaking her.

Senketsu is warm. Warm, and safe, and when he slips on her body, she's hit immediately with the scent of home. Of croquettes, of that cucumber-and-vanilla of her mother's detergent, of Ryuko.

Ryuko.

She watches, standing still. A battle she has no place in, loud and bright and painful, her heart racing from it, even from here. Senketsu's become *her* armor, *her* protector, she knows, but he shouldn't be, he *can't* be, not now, not when she's not the one who needs saving, when she's standing so far away, frozen, anxious, uncertain. The ink on her hands can't be worth much now, she finds herself thinking, somehow, despite everything. It must be so smeared and faded that it may as well be gone.

There aren't any instructions left when Satsuki's blades fall to the ground. It makes a terrible *clatter*, and everything slows. Senketsu's comfort turns poisonous. Mako's breath catches in her throat, her mind filling in the blanks. Ryuko's Scissor Blade, cut clean through her own sister. All of them destroyed here. Ryuko never returning to the Ryuko she loves, to *her* Ryuko, smiling, always.

There's no time.

"Sorry, Senketsu," Mako whispers, pulling him off her body. He can't get involved. She can't-she *won't* -see Ryuko hurt him.

It probably won't work, she thinks, running towards Ryuko, pushing Senketsu away. Her legs feel like rubber. How long has passed? Everything's spinning. It probably won't work. But she has to try.

There's one thing Mako can do, to save her.

Mako stares wide-eyed, slack-jawed.

" *Me?* " she repeats, incredulously.

Satsuki nods. She's wearing nothing more than a white blanket, but she's as regal as ever. She looks Mako right in the eyes. "Yes. Senketsu and I will distract her, but I need *you* to deliver a message to my Elite Four."

"I…"

Satsuki smiles. "I know you can do it."

She writes words on Mako's hands. It's only when the ink has dried that she squeezes them. "You're strong, Mankanshoku," she says. "I know you can do this, to save your friend."

Mako draws her hands away, pulling them to her heart. Somehow, she's started crying. She lets the tears fall. "I'll do anything to save Ryuko!" she declares.

Satsuki laughs. "I know you will," she says. "After all, you've done it before."

Mako can tell it's not genuine.

Ryuko hasn't taken off her pajamas. Her hair is uncombed, sticking out in odd directions, and her eyes are tired, dead.

She smiles. It's false.

"I just need to rest," she says, as though that explains everything. "I'll be… okay."

Usually, Mako would know exactly what to say. She'd make the world her stage. She'd dance as though a spotlight shone down on her, as though her every word carried a certain weight, a certain meaning, a

certain depth that would leave all in awe. She'd smile big, make a show.

But now she's silent.

Ryuko's taken to looking out the window. There's no view, really. A dirt field, the wall of another building just like this one, scattered garbage and weeds. A part of Mako wants to pry her away from it, wants to make everything right. After she'd stopped Ryuko's rampage, she'd thought she'd fixed everything. Ryuko was saved. Ryuko wouldn't die, wouldn't leave her, would smile again.

Ryuko's smiling now. Smiling, as she looks out to nothing. Smiling, but it looks terrible. Smiling, but it's all wrong.

Mako doesn't know what to say. She doesn't know how to help.

So she's silent.

When Mako was a child, she never wanted to go to the bath after she'd scraped her knee riding the bike her father had "fixed" for her, or when she fell on her way to school, or tripped on the steps down to the train. Something about hot water and injuries never mixed well together. They always stung.

Now she doesn't have any wounds on her body, but she feels as though she does as she slips down further into the water. Her whole body stings, aching, heavy, and she draws her arms around herself, falling deeper and deeper 'til her mouth's completely covered up, hidden beneath the murky water, lost to darkness. She blows a series of tiny bubbles, a soft *hum* to fill the night air.

We're evil, she thinks, breathing through her nose, bubbles bursting from her mouth. I'm evil, I'm evil, I'm *evil*, but she still smiles at me anyway. Every wound, every scrape, every bump and sore, every terrible thing she'd done, Ryuko smiled at it, as if it was nothing. As if it was *good* . As if she'd been saved.

The bath is a good place to cry, Mako decides.

Mako can't really explain what it is about the stranger.

There's a lonely look in her eyes, she wants to say, something sad, and longing. Wanting for *something*, and Mako can't tell what it is-well, not for certain, anyway-but she thinks she knows, because she's spent endless hours alone with nothing but leaves and chalk so cheap it crumbled in her hands to keep her company, and she can recognize someone who understands the same feeling. She thinks so, anyway.

And she wants more than anything to make a person like that smile. If she could save that someone, could make them feel as happy as she did when they first sat next to each other, or when she was sure that this time was different, or when she was right and she was saved, when that stranger saved her, when that stranger saved her and-

Her mother's staring. She feels a blush come over her cheeks.

"I don't think she has any place to live," Mako ends up saying. "You have to let her stay with us! She saved my life!"

Her mother doesn't hesitate, and nods her head *yes* .

A/N: So, who's been around long enough to get this title?

Something He Could Never Be - Ryuketsu

Something He Could Never Be

She's taken to running.

Her legs ache, and every step sends a shiver of pain up her body, and he's heavy, oh *damn* he's heavy, but she thinks to herself that this situation's really not so unusual for her, not at all, not after her countless days of bloody lips and shoulders tinged in purple and bumps that blushed red for weeks after they'd first broken out on her skin, and she thinks some more that she knows better than this. It won't do her any good to focus on all the hurt and her screaming body. She has to make her mind go elsewhere. To stories, fairytales. Anything.

So it's just like her that she does just that, and they're tumbling through her mind again as she carries on, as she romanticizes the whole thing, telling herself now, I'm the Little Mermaid, I'm stuck on land, I'm stepping on swords, but it'll be okay. Of course it will be. She's strong and she's got her arms wrapped tight 'round his broken body and she won't stop and she won't let go.

She can't.

"Just hang in there," she tells him, breathlessly. "We'll get you somewhere safe, and you can put yourself together just like last time." She swallows hard. Her mouth burns. "So don't be reckless, and-"

He's laughing. Somehow he'd grown fond of doing that. (And if she asked, she knew he'd say he'd gotten it from her. The thought gets a strange sensation going in her chest.)

By now he's sparking and fizzing something awful, but if he cares about that he's certainly not letting it on. He's looking up at her like his body's not collapsing all around him and like she can't see the cold, hard slabs of metal, sullied and exposed, glinting beneath the vivid yellow glow of streetlamps that are too much and too bright.

"Being reckless?" he repeats. "After everything we've been through?"

He tries at smiling, but he's never been so good at it, always stretching his lips *outwards* instead of *upwards*, making this awkward, crooked sort of look, like a child faking it for the camera, or the way she'd once smiled for him, back when he was nothing more than an irritating, worthless pile of wires and metal and the reason her father had choked out his last breath right in front of her. It's a hideous, terrible thing normally, but now it looks something else, too.

Pained.

"Your heart's beating much too quickly, Ryuko," he goes on. "You'd better stop if you don't want to pass out."

She speeds up. "Idiot! Don't you be thinkin' about me at a time like this! You've got to-"

"Don't push yourself," he says. A pause. "Please. I don't want you to get hurt. Not now."

She can't help it. She stops.

Her heart *is* beating much too fast. She can scarcely breathe. And *fuck* do her arms hurt from hauling his heavy ass all around.

"So what am I supposed to do?" she asks, quietly.

He gestures best he can towards an old brick wall. It's filthy-everything's filthy around here-and she's shaking her head before she even realizes she is.

"We can't stop here. We have to get you back to-"

"Ryuko, please."

He's not smiling anymore. There's a desperation in his eyes, the kind she can't refuse.

She puts him down, up against the wall. He struggles to even stay sitting up, but it doesn't stop him from reaching his hand out towards her.

"Can I?" he asks.

They say people react better to things that look like them.

Rescue robots-they exist for exactly that purpose. They look almost-human, with faces that move just like hers. They come to save you when and where no ordinary human could, and then they reassure you that all will be all right with a smiling face that you can imagine to not be a machine, to *not* be composed of wires and metal and technology.

But Ryuko's long known the stench of machines, and it was for nearly her entire life that the thought of *robots* brought to her mind images of the steel and aluminum and copper arms of her mother, and the memory of how warm they were, how caring, how loving, and yet also the sickening emptiness inside as she remembered too her father's curses, and his loud and angered demands that she ought never call a machine a mother, that it's *not* one, and he'd better never hear such a thing from her again.

And she'd thought, in retrospect, that when he stopped recharging Mother's batteries and locked the machine away on the pretense that she was too old for such a thing that he was simply protecting her. He was saving her from growing too attached to something that surely couldn't love her back, and saving her from a lifetime of

misery, of delusion, of believing that robots are something *more* than wires and electricity and metal.

And she'd thought, too, that surely it was one of her fondest memories, sitting in her mother's lap as she read her stories from long ago and faraway places, telling in a gentle, mystic voice countless tales of princesses and magic and wonder.

The night before Mother was lost to her forever, she chose to read *The Little Mermaid.* And Ryuko wondered, often, how it was that story ended, because no matter how far back she goes in her memories, she cannot recall. She remembers only a strangeness to her mother's voice, a kind of sadness and regret, and the mermaid dancing and dancing, her legs aching and screaming, but dancing all the same.

It's late, and she's sore, and they fought too long that day, he'd said so as soon as it ended, tending to her wounds with hands that are human but aren't, with a touch that's warm and loving-more warm and loving than anything-yet also the cold, cool touch of a machine, of a *thing,* of messed-up, pitiful pieces of scrap she found hidden away in her father's basement that surely she was never supposed to find.

But she doesn't care about any of that. She doesn't *believe* any of that, not as she takes his hand into hers, not as she brings it towards her chest, not as she speaks his name and asks if he hears it, the steady beat of her heart, the gentle rhythm that always brings him back when he's lost everything, and not as he nods his head *yes* and she then brings that close, too, and he cries in a way only robots can.

No tears fall, but she can hear his sobs, ravaged and pained.

"How many times has it been now?" he asks. He doesn't move from his place, his head still pressed up against her and his face hidden from view, though she figures that she wouldn't be able to see him

much even if he were to look her right in the eye. No way, with only the smudgy yellow of the streetlamps outside giving the place any light at *this* terrible hour.

Still. He's never stayed so close to her like this before, and instead of pushing him away, she finds her fingers running through his hair, and her mouth murmuring words of comfort.

"I ain't keeping track of it," she says. "Stop worryin' so much, won't you?"

He shakes his head, over and over again, still stuck in this awkward position, still refusing to look her way.

"You're fine," she says, cooler than she meant it, almost mechanical. She sighs, swallows hard. "You're not broken, okay?"

"I must be," he argues. "No other robot forgets like I do. No other robot. None but me."

"You're not like other robots," she tells him. "You know that."

He lifts his head. She can't make out his expression, or really anything at all besides this great, dark mass before her, but he stares a long moment her way, and she knows well that *he* can see the sweat forming on her forehead, and the way she's struggling to smile for him, and how she hasn't bothered much with the buttons on this pajama top, and how it puckers up and sits against her body all wrong.

"You know that," she repeats.

He's silent. He keeps staring, only to put a hand against her heart once more. She shuts her eyes. Right. The sound can always bring him back. The feel can always make him remember. As long as they have that, he'll be fine. She'll be fine.

They'll be fine.

"You're worried," he says, and she laughs a little, quietly, half-honest and half-farce, knowing full well that her obnoxious robot didn't need to put his hand there to get that, hating that just one glance can tell him everything.

But she fights it. Of course she does.

"I'm *fine,"* she insists. He's fine. They're fine.

They're gonna be fine.

"Your heart-"

"Is fine."

He pulls his hand away. There's a long glance once more, and she wants to roll her eyes at him and tell him to get to sleep, we'll talk tomorrow, but he proceeds to do something he's never done before, and she gasps, loudly, despite herself.

It's a hug. Tight and intimate, his arms wrapped intensely around her, as though if he let go, she'd be gone. He doesn't say a word, bringing her closer and closer, but every last bit of her is telling her to push him away, to get out of this mess, that it's beyond rude of him to go and pull this kind of shit, and who does he even think he is, and he surely needs a few more lessons in "Human Decency as Told By Ryuko (Who Is Not Very Decent at All)," and she's *really* not one for these mushy, tender, overly-sweet displays of affection, and…

And… it's wrong, isn't it? His touch is the cold touch of one who can never be human. His fingers are cool against her skin, breaking through the thin fabric of her pajamas. He smells like wires and metal, like electricity and *robots.*

And yet. He smells like home.

She falls into the embrace. There's a strange feeling inside, indescribable, a burst of energy that brings her own arms around

him, and buries her face into his chest. Is this what it feels like, she wonders, to be held by an atrocity? Is this what it feels like, to enjoy it? Her makeshift bed on the other side of the floor doesn't seem nearly so appealing now. Cold as his touch is, as…

He falls back with all her weight. There's a heavy *thud,* and Ryuko breathes a sigh of relief as she hears her family's snores continue on as though nothing had happened at all.

But then she realizes that she's been left toppled on top of him, and that she's got utterly no sense left.

None. Zip. Nadda.

For a long moment, she's motionless, silent. And he's silent, too, surely staring up at her, wondering when she's gonna storm off and rush away from here. That's what she *should* do, she knows. Wish him a goodnight, scramble out of this stupidity. He's fine now, if… clingy. He doesn't need her help anymore. He ought to sleep, she ought to, this is all silly and she shouldn't give in to… whatever this is.

But his chest feels awfully good, and so do his arms wrapped around her, and she thinks that he wouldn't mind it, if she fell asleep, just like this, her heart beating against his metal skin, her head pressed into him, his fingers running through her hair. So she shuts her eyes right there, and there she stays, way until the sun peeks through the dim windows, and her family awakes, and sees this grotesque sight before them.

A girl curled up next to a rescue robot that doesn't even function right! It surely is a problem. He's most certainly broken, and she just as broken as he, to look so content against him, as though he were something else, something he could never be.

You're supposed to turn rescue robots off after their job is done.

You're supposed to shove them into a closet for next time. There's no use keeping them on all the time, wasting energy. They serve one purpose, one goal: rescuing humans. Beyond that they are useless.

But she runs off into battle holding his hand. The fact that he was made for saving is lost to her, and him. He fights with an inhuman strength and power. When they're together on the battlefield, it is almost as though they are dancing. It's a waltz amidst chaos. A *pas de deux* where it doesn't fit. Neither of them fit. None of it fits.

She breathes hard, as the battle's won, smiling his way.

His hand can hardly stay up.

He's trembling like a human, trying to feel her heart. She steadies it as best she can with her own shaking hands.

"You'll get to hear it lots of times later," she says. She smiles, but she knows he can see the tears clinging to her eyelashes, even in this rain, where everyone is crying and no one is all at once. "We should… keep going. You need to get fixed up, okay?"

He pulls his hand away. She hates the smile he gives her. It's all sorts of wrong. For a robot designed to mimic human expressions to make a victim feel safe, he fails. She hates that look, how it's never quite right. She hates that it looks so strained, even when she knows it's not. She hates the innocence of it, that it's the warmest, kindest, gentlest thing she's ever seen. She hates that she loves it so much. She hates that she wants him to keep smiling at her, even now, when she should be running, when he needs help, when they need to *go,* when she needs to…

"Shh," he tells her. "Your heart is still beating too quickly. Please, don't cry."

She shakes her head. She has to hide her face. He can't see her like this. "You idiot. I ain't cryin'."

His whole body's falling apart around him. There are great sparks in this rain, and metallic *rustles* as parts tumble away.

"What makes this time different, huh?" she asks, ignoring the way she can barely speak anymore, ignoring how she can barely see anymore, ignoring the *cracks* and *fizzes* that surround her, ignoring his stupid, irritating, worthless smile. "I just need to get you back. I'm okay now, and I'll-"

"But Ryuko," he breaks in, "you know-"

"It doesn't matter!"

She's crying. She's not supposed to be crying. She's not supposed to be yelling.

"No, it's… okay," he says. He brings his hand up again, but this time it's to brush away her tears. It's no use. They keep coming and coming, and he's not supposed to see her. Not like this. Not when he's…

She collapses into him. If she shuts her eyes, she can imagine they're back at home, and he smells like home, and he feels like home, and cold as he is, he's the most comforting thing-the most comforting *person* -she could have ever leaned against, and that in itself is warmer than anything else.

She knows what they all say, about people like her. They're delusional. Jokes. Robots can't love you like you love them. They're all wires and machinery, and no matter how much you *think* they truly care, or *think* that they want to be with you, it's all a trick, a play. They're not real, not like people are. They're objects. Things. Toys.

But they don't know her Senketsu. She raises her head. The light's fading from his eyes, but he's still smiling that stupid smile, looking at her like she's the only thing that matters in the world, and she can't take it anymore, and looks away.

"You're different," she says. "You're not like the rest of them. So if we just get you back, and-"

"Shh," he says, again. "Please. Don't push yourself. Please."

"Why do you care so much?!" she cries. "You can't worry about me now. You can't."

It's all over, anyway. It's all over. It doesn't matter what she says, or what she does. She can hardly even draw breath, let alone get away from here. His body's falling apart. He's gonna… right here, he's gonna…

She puts her own hand over her chest. Her heartbeat pounds rapidly against her palm. She tries at laughing, but it comes out sounding more like a strained, ugly, hacking cough.

"Was the reason you always liked this," she starts, the words tumbling out faster than she can stop herself, "because it's…" It's what? It's not human? It's just as robotic as he is? Composed of metals and wires and nothing fleshy at all, not anymore?

"Because it's… just like you?" she ends up asking.

He shakes his head. He puts his hand over hers once more. It sparks and fizzes as he does so.

"No," he says. "It's because it's *yours.* Your sound. You."

She laughs, for real, now. When did this happen? What happened to her shitty, irritating robot who never knew how to say the right things in the right way at all? She chokes on her own laughter. The world spins.

"It's not fair, you know," she says. She pulls his hand away, looking deep into his eyes. "Dad… he knew you would… he knew…" She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter. I just…"

"Ryuko…"

"Shh!" She shakes her head some more. Her hair is stringy and wet and flopping in her face. She must look just as terrible as he does right now. Maybe worse. "I just…" She puts a hand on his face. There won't be another time to figure this out. There won't be an *ever after.* There won't be the *eventually* she was waiting for.

Maybe it's all wrong. But…

"I meant it, what I said, Senketsu. You and Mako… you're my special people."

She leans in closer. She brushes the hair from his face. Her heart quickens even more. There isn't much time left. There isn't *any* time left.

"And I love you."

She kisses him. It's brief, and she pulls away as soon as she does. He pulls her back in. She wraps her arms around him, falling into his destroyed body, falling into *him.* They're terrible at this. It has to be the worst thing she's ever done. She's a fool. She's a joke. This is stupid. And yet she doesn't want to stop.

He pulls away first.

"I'm… glad," he tries, smiling that horrid smile she hates and loves, "I'm glad I met you."

And she smiles back. She laughs so hard she cries. She puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I'm not glad I *kissed* you!" she says. "You're terrible! We're going to have to practice a lot more, you got that?"

He doesn't answer. She shakes him, her laughter breaking into sobs, the *fizz* of his body collapsing filling her ears, the bright lights of the sparks nothing more than smears of orange and yellow across her foggy vision.

And yet, nothing seems clearer to her than his terrible, hideous, beautiful smile, his eyes clouded over, and his body still.

Cup Curry Rice - Ryuko, Sukuyo, Mako

Cup Curry Rice

When Ryuko is ten years old, she takes nearly all her meals at her boarding school.

Day after day, she eats yogurt out of little disposable bowls, drinks milk from tiny cardboard cartons, pulls back the flimsy plastic lids of prepackaged *natto,* pushes chopsticks into fish and dumplings and rice and salads and *miso* soup loaded with soft noodles she's torn free from its wrapper. Day after day, she eats out of colorful trays and decorative bowls and she thinks that it all tastes pretty good, and though it's maybe not so good as *real* food-as some fancy, home-cooked meal-it does the job and fills her up and that's enough.

More than enough, she figures one chilly afternoon, three days before winter vacation. Just some instant rice and curry would be enough. The *oyakodon* before her feels almost extravagant, and she pokes at it more than she actually eats it, trying her hardest to appear as though she is most definitely *not* listening to her classmates' conversations, and all their excited squealing for the coming holiday.

Yuki sits in the center of it all, still wearing her new red coat even though it's not *that* cold inside, the color so bright that she looks like a big, nasty stain of ketchup against the grim, gray skies that fill the window behind her. But she's smiling big, the dreary weather surely not affecting her mood, boasting that her mom makes the best *chikuzenni* in the world, gushing on and on about all the things her family has planned for the days to come, and sighing about how she cannot wait another day here, stuffed away in this school.

The other girls hovering around Yuki's desk voice their agreement. They're more than ready to get out of here, and spend a few blissful

days free of this place.

Ryuko smiles at the thought. She'll do anything to stay in this school, she thinks, and she does, spending the holiday right where she is, by herself.

They serve a nice *kenchin* soup for dinner on New Year's, with finely-seasoned mackerel, and white rice sprinkled with *wakame.*

It's exactly what they would have served on any other day, and Ryuko finds that more than perfect.

When Ryuko is fourteen years old, her father asks her to come visit him for New Year's.

I want to talk, his note says, clearly written quite hastily, his *kanji* scarcely legible and what looks to be a mustard stain marring the rightmost corner.

Ryuko takes ten thousand years to leave and winds up riding a very late train back. She doesn't arrive home until it's far past evening and well into the night,and as she unlocks the door and steps inside, she's sure that her father's already in bed-or asleep and crumpled over the keyboard of his lab's computer, at least. She flicks on the lights and drops her bags to the floor, heading straight for the kitchen to scrounge up whatever food her dad's got lying around. Her expectations are lower than low in that department, but she knows it doesn't really matter. She just needs something that does the job.

But the kitchen is filled with the aroma of something that smells *wonderful,* and she stops in her place. The last time Dad had invited her back, it was clearer than clear that he never bothered with cooking for himself, and he'd looked very embarrassed about his lack of food, and he'd said, Shit, I'll go to the grocer's and fix you up something, as though he really cared, and she had said right back, No, no, don't fucking bother, and she'd gone to the convenience store down the street and bought bunches of instant rice and curry

and chips and sweets and anything else that was easy and *food.* No use making her dad do anything useless like cooking for her, she'd thought, and she'd eaten the stuff alone in her room, and left days before her vacation was over.

Had Dad… really cooked for her now?

A pot's been left on the table, a note beside it.

Help yourself, it says. *Don't bother saving any leftovers.*

Ryuko doesn't know how long it's been out, and had it been anything else, she probably would have just ignored it completely and eaten something from the fridge or cupboards instead. But she pulls the lid and finds that it's *gameni* that her father's made, and a strange sensation builds up in her throat as she decides that that's reason enough to eat it, regardless of how long it's been sitting there and how it might just end up making her sick.

It's colder than cold, but Ryuko thinks that's perfect for her, and she eats it 'til it's gone, wondering all the while, smiling, laughing to herself, if her father even knows that *gameni* is her favorite food of all.

He never seems to tell her, whatever it is he wanted to talk about, and Ryuko thinks that that's perfect for her, too.

When Ryuko is sixteen years old, she curses the fact that she has to eat.

Her alarm clock blaring every morning is as much a reminder to *wake up* as it is that she's *hungry* and she'd best put some food in her mouth. She wanders aimlessly-or not-so-aimlessly, she tells herself, as she marks off high schools from her list when they prove to have no leads whatsoever, as though coming up with dead ends is somehow *progress* -and she sleeps wherever she can find, and eats whatever she can find, too. And it's not like she's unhealthy, she

convinces herself, every time she buys fresh fruit from the local markets, but more often than not she's microwaving instant rice, and making instant *miso* soup, and filling her garbage bins with the empty containers of instant *yakisoba.* It's not good food, she thinks, surely not as good as *real* food, but it's not bad, and pretty tasty for stuff she gets for only a handful of yen, and when she discovers the wonders of Cup Curry Rice in the early summer, she buys stacks and stacks of the stuff-all in the "spicy" flavor, of course-and marvels at the advancements of the modern age, and how she can now get her curry and rice all in one, easy, convenient package.

When Ryuko is seventeen years old, she curses the fact that dinner only comes once a day.

What first seemed to be *not good food* and *not as good as* real *food* becomes suddenly the greatest food she has ever eaten. And though it feels far too extravagant, and tastes far too nice, she can't help her growing longings to return from school, sit at the table, clasp her hands together, and eat croquettes until she can't eat even one more.

She still picks up Cup Curry Rice for lunch, sometimes, to stave off her hunger, but it never seems to taste as good as it used to, and never seems to feel as right and deserved as it once did for just *doing the job,* and her eyes find themselves wandering over to Mako's giant *bento* from her mom more often than she would like to admit, and then falling back to her own little microwavable cup, and then to nowhere at all as she stuffs her face and tries not to think about it.

Once, in the late fall, when the air should be cool and dreary but it still feels almost blisteringly hot (or is it just her?), Mako offers her half.

"No way am I gonna eat your lunch, Mako!" Ryuko says, quite flustered, when it happens. "Ain't no way I could do that after your mom spent all that time makin' it for you."

She looks down to her Cup Curry Rice, the red-brown mass of who-knows-what seeming more unappealing than ever. "Besides," she goes on, smiling, "this is fine."

It does the job, after all, she reasons to herself, as she always has.

But she can't finish it, and throws it away half-eaten.

When Ryuko is seventeen years old, she sleepily goes to brush her teeth after a quick lemon for breakfast, only to be stopped by Mrs. Mankanshoku on her way outside.

It's still early. Mrs. Mankanshoku's still in her pink-and-white striped pajamas, and most of her hair is still stuck within the giant, bulbous cloud of fabric that is her overly-large sleeping cap, but she's still wide awake regardless, a great scowl on her face as she points an accusing finger towards the toothbrush clutched in Ryuko's hand.

"And what do you think you're doing, brushing your teeth with *that?"* she asks, her scowl very much staying put.

Ryuko flushes. She supposes that it's not exactly in the best condition. The bristles are all very worn by now, spilling out messily, fuzzy and frayed. She hasn't bothered with a new one in ages. Never really saw the use, she figures now, since the thing still does the job, no matter the horrible state of it.

But Mrs. Mankanshoku doesn't see it that way. "Your teeth are all going to fall out if you keep using something like that!" she cries. "And then who's going to eat my special croquettes, huh?!"

From the pockets of her pants she pulls out a mostly-empty plastic carton, and from that she pulls out a very adorable, very *pink* toothbrush with a carved smiling bunny on its end, and bristles that are very white and bright and fresh and unused.

"You'd best use this," she says, offering the toothbrush to Ryuko.

"I-" Ryuko starts.

"Come on, don't be silly, hon!" Mrs. Mankanshoku says. "You can't possibly keep using *that.* " She winks, showing Ryuko the now-empty carton, and the illustration on its backside. "I get these in packs of three, you know?" She points to the package, and Ryuko does indeed see three toothbrush designs featured-the bunny that's now clasped in her fingers, an injured yellow cat with a black eyepatch and bandages all over its head, and an orange bear with its tongue out.

"One for Mako, one for Mataro," Mrs. Mankanshoku goes on, "and now one for you."

For a moment, Ryuko doesn't know what to say, as she takes the new toothbrush in hand.

It ends up all she says is a quiet, "Thank you, ma'am. I really appreciate it."

She throws the old toothbrush away.

When Ryuko is seventeen years old, she comes to dinner to find a strange new bowl at her usual place.

No longer is it the typical, ordinary blank bowl she always uses for her rice. Now it has her name written on it, in neat, tidy black letters. Mrs. Mankanshoku must notice the odd look that's come across her face, because she's the only one who mentions it, smiling kindly.

"I thought it about time you got one of your own," she says.

For some reason, Ryuko thinks dinner tastes even better when it comes out of a bowl that just has some new markings on it, and she thinks that there's something perfect in that, even though it's surely unnecessary and useless and shouldn't feel perfect at all.

When Ryuko is seventeen years old, she's just about prepared to leave for school when Mrs. Mankanshoku hands her a box wrapped in a cheerful yellow handkerchief.

"Don't forget your lunch," she says, and Ryuko realizes all at once that the second *bento* she saw prepared in the kitchen was meant for *her,* and the package feels suddenly very heavy in her hands.

Ryuko doesn't know that Mrs. Mankanshoku had made *extra* extra for dinner to have *extra* extra leftovers, and doesn't know that when Mr. Mankanshoku had asked *why,* that she had said quite cheerfully that it was for Ryuko's *bento,* and she showed him her calendar of planned meals for Mako *and* Ryuko to take to school with them, and he frowned a little at that, and said that she's doing too much for that girl, you know, and she clucked her tongue and said right back, She's better company than *you* loafers and I do plenty for you, and he was quiet and indignant after that, but then she added, She saved our daughter's life, and then he was very much silent as she said, It's the least we can do, to provide her with what every growing girl should have.

Ryuko doesn't know that Mrs. Mankanshoku had found one of her old Cup Curry Rice bowls in the trash and doesn't know that Mrs. Mankanshoku's mind flitted to all the fighting that Ryuko does all the time and how a little tiny cup of instant curry certainly couldn't be enough, and doesn't know that she woke up extra early to make this *bento* especially special, filled to the brim with croquettes and fish and crab and hamburger steak and lettuce and cherry tomatoes and all sorts of things to keep Ryuko strong.

All Ryuko knows is that she's got a fancy, home-cooked *bento* in her hands that was made just for her.

And Ryuko says, "Thank you, ma'am."

And Mrs. Mankanshoku says, "Not a problem at all, dear."

And Ryuko is very quiet, as Mrs. Mankanshoku pulls her into a hug, and then out of it, and says, "Now get to school, and have a good day!"

And it's very odd, but Ryuko thinks then that the idea of having Cup Curry Rice for lunch has never felt more wrong.

A/N: So, I love *stories about fathers and find father figures really sweet (and I cannot express how feelsy I get with stuff about single dads), but is it just me, or are mother figures not nearly as big a thing? Especially when it comes to Ryuko? We got this huge father figure reading for Senketsu (and don't even get me started on how much I don't agree with* that *), but I hardly see anything about how Sukuyo fills the role of Ryuko's mom and how* good *that is!*

Arms - Senketsu, Ryuko

Arms

She gasps as she takes her father's old *kabuto* off her head, a hand going instantly to where his armor had been pierced, where blood now leaks through what's become a regular *hakama*, soaking through his fabric, straight onto her fingers.

Her breathing becomes ragged and coarse and strained and as he listens, he knows that in a time that seems so long ago, he would have done anything to drink more and more of the blood that's falling all over him; but now she's pressing her hand tighter and tighter against his body and the sound of her crying out in pain fills him up and he can't think about the blood and he can't think about his own hunger and monstrous desires and needs because he can think only of *her* and how he wishes more than anything to have arms he could use to wrap her in bandages and hold her close and place her *kabuto* back on her head and assure her that everything will be alright without any words at all.

But he doesn't have any of that so he can only say, quietly, "Please, don't push yourself."

A/N: A three-sentence AU with the prompt, "Ryuketsu, feudal Japan."

nonsense - Ryuketsu

nonsense

It's a dream, he thinks, he knows, this world that surrounds him, suffocating and hot, because he's been here before, this place is no stranger. It disguises itself as a friend, every time, as righteousness, and it is no different now, as it wraps cold fingers around him, as everything hurts and his mouth fills with bile and he begs to wake and yet he can't. He can't.

All around him is fire, bold yellows and burnt oranges, flames brushing against him, almost lazily, absentmindedly. All around him is more red than he's ever seen or known, ugly and dark and nothing like the red he loves, and it runs cool hands over him, holding close, tight, so much that he cannot breathe, tearing him apart, bit by bit by bit.

And surely it hurts, oh, God, of course it hurts, but it is nothing, stupid, insignificant, compared to what overtakes him as he looks up, as he sees her, crimson and scarlet, bright and shining in his eyes, his light and spark and whatever else it is that humans say when it comes to matters of love, and no, he cannot think of himself, how could he? She's pushing her face into his, she's burning her cheeks, she's shouting and yelling, spilling tears. She's crying.

And he thinks, this is what it means, to be loved, to be special to someone.

Her warmth tries to pull him away. He reaches for it, selfishly, despite himself, and he wants to say something, anything, but he cannot speak, cannot move his mouth, but she can, and she does, steadying a steely, red-rimmed gaze his way, rosy stains smudged across her cheeks, whispering, coarse, but firm, You touch me, and you burn.

He wakes. He blinks his eyes open and wakes, and there she is, beside him, with him, holding, close. Her skin is soft, her hair that she's let grow long splayed all across his body and the pillow and the sheets, and he's filled with her, all of her, the rise and fall of her chest, her quiet breaths and hearty snores, the strawberries of her shampoo and the gentle *beat* of her heart and the tiniest bits of sweat building up on her forehead, and he knows that she is not truly asleep.

It is dark, but he sees. He's always seen.

Are you all right?

It's what he asks, as she stirs, as her gaze flickers from the alarm clock to the ceiling to the outfit she's got ready for tomorrow, hanging outside her wardrobe, illuminated by only pale streaks of moonlight.

Yeah, she says. Yeah, yeah.

Jus' can't. Sleep.

The one with the fire again?

She pauses, considering.

There are twelve-hour work schedules she's got to push her life around and it's hardly four in the morning when she gives up and rises, stretching out her arms, yawning and sighing, apologizing, It's too damn early, I know, I know.

He offers to go with her, of course he does.

But I gotta wear that uniform, she says, and You would never want to look so tacky, and she laughs, holding up the smock that she has to tie over her red overalls and puffy white shirt, checker-patterned with

bunnies dancing along the pockets adorning its front, and he cannot help himself, grimacing at the sight.

No, he would *not* like to look like that, thank you very much.

And yet, there is something so very cute about her when she wears it, and she must spot his envious stares, because she holds him close and smiles and smirks, filling him with a rush of warmth.

No need to make that face, she says, forgetting, as she is oft to do, that he hasn't got a face at all. We'll always be together, 'member?

Her grip loosens, and she quiets, fingers brushing along him, eyes staring straight ahead, unfocused.

I ain't takin' you off for as long as I live.

So she brings along pieces. Some days it's a belt she drapes along her waist, decorative and black, hidden beneath her colorful smock, and some days, when it's cold, it's an extra shirt that sits against her skin, and some days, when she wakes with great shadows under her eyes and says little to him before she leaves in those early hours of the morning, she takes a glove, soft and blood red, and he feels her fingers cross over it throughout the day, as she whispers words they've grown fond of, as she smiles.

Always, every day, she brings his eyes, his voice, a bright red ribbon tying back her hair. Always, every day, he feels her warmth.

The children at the *hoikuen* think that Miss Matoi is quite funny, talking in two tones. The adults think that she ought to stop playing around, should go do her ventriloquist act somewhere else, but they can't fire you, he says, you're too good, you know that.

He is quiet, but she hears. She's always heard.

She never marries.

Ain't no modern woman got time for that, she says, and he knows it's true, because she's busy, oh, God, she's busy, and when she returns home in the late evening and pulls away the smock and the red overalls and slips completely into him, he feels her exhaustion as though it were his own, and he holds her, close, tight.

I still think you should, though, he tells her, once, before she's shut off the lamp for the night, her body pressed up against him, her face stuffed in a book. He lists off the names of people they know, and he says, I think you'd be happy, if you took the time and did it, got married to one of them.

And she shuts her book with a great *slam* and her face turns very red and she shakes her head and falls back against her pillow and stares up and up and up at the ceiling and What are you talking about, she says, it don't work that way, you obnoxious outfit, you can't just go and drop that kinda question on someone outta nowhere, and he says right back, Well, maybe you ought to try making it so it's *not* coming out of nowhere, and she keeps shaking her head, over and over and over again, repeating, like a mantra, Nope, nope, nope, not a chance, not a chance.

And maybe he would have pried more, but she sits up very quickly, looking, staring, like she's seeing him for the first time.

What is it, huh? she asks. You gettin' tired of me? Want me to get hitched and outta your hair?

After all, you touch me, and you burn. You love me, and you burn.

You don't want to get burned, do you?

It's a dream, he thinks, but he doesn't know.

They stand before her mirror, silent, staring. It's dark. The lamp's burned out, and she hasn't got a new lightbulb yet. She's never bothered changing the ones attached to the ceiling, either. No use, she says.

So there are candles, five of them, three on one side and two on the other, resting on the surface, wax dripping down their sides, casting red shadows over her face, over his.

It's not like that, he says, his mind full of her tears, of her warmth reaching for him, trying, desperately, to tear him free from the cool hands of an endless, fantastical fire.

Not like what?

He makes her a wedding dress. In a moment, he's pearly lace and ruffles and delicate gloves over her hands and a veil upon her head that falls across her body in gentle waves. In a moment, he's flowers adorning her bodice, a bow jutting out behind her, ribbons and silk and satin and yards and yards of snowy, delicate white. In a moment, he's beautiful.

She's still a long time, not saying a word. Her hands reach out to touch her reflection, as though to assure herself that this is real, and she is here, and this dress is not some fantasy, this time, some dream that could never be, that now, here, this dress is hers, truly hers.

And he says, I just want you to be happy.

And she repeats the word back, tentative, unsure, and he answers, begging, pleading, Yes, I do not want to hold you back.

And it's just the light, he thinks, but a bit of color comes over her, maybe, flecks of rose smeared across her cheeks, he sees it, he swears, and she stiffens, pulling her hands away from the mirror, reaching out towards him, where he rests against her heart. But the movement is too awkward, uncalculated, and the candle flames rise

up towards her arm, his arm, their arm, and he is burning, they are both burning, fire spilling over them, tearing away the white wedding dress and the woman wrapped tight in its threads.

She wakes. She blinks her eyes open and wakes, sitting straight up in bed, gasping out his name, staring blankly into the darkness.

He holds her closer, as though that would truly help, as though that would calm her heart that's racing against him. I'm here, he says, I'm right here, so don't worry, please, don't worry.

She falls back into bed, pulling sheets over the both of them, sighing, content, wrapping arms around their bodies entwined together. What a relief, she murmurs, her voice filled with weary and exhaustion, tired and sad. What a relief, what a relief.

But her breaths are still coming too quickly, and she's trembling, slightly, and he almost yearns for the dreams, where he'd leave, go, finally stop hurting her.

He looks up, at her determined eyes, at her firm, unwavering grip on him.

The one with the fire again?

Yeah, she says.

Yeah. Yeah.

Before she slips away from this place, she lies with him in the early-morning light, brushing absentminded fingers across his body.

The other night, she says, knowing well that he is not asleep, though he has not said a word. I dreamt Akane got mad and took ya from me.

And what'd you do?

She laughs. He loves the way the sound rumbles against him, full of warmth, life, and he loves even more the smile that comes over her face. She rolls over to her back, staring up at the ceiling, watching as it fills with glimmers of light.

That's the thing, she says. I didn't do nothin'. The two of you got along so well, Akane even stopped throwing food at Izumi during lunch. The others kept sayin', Oh, look at her, I don't feel so bad about her getting a spot here anymore, she's really behaving now, what a sweet child, all that stuff. Can you believe it?

He pauses, considering.

You think it could be that easy, to get Akane to calm down?

She shrugs. She rises, sitting up, stretching her arms out wide, yawning.

Well, you have a way with people like that, don't you think?

The times it gets bad, she crawls out of bed, up to the roof of her building, and she sits, dangling her legs over the edge, her eyes staring up at the stars, the moon, any light that is faraway, distant.

Did it hurt, she asks, once, quiet, vulnerable. Back when we fell?

She does not look his way, curling in on herself, hugging her knees, burying her face into the long white skirt he had made, soft as fleece and warmer than any blanket. It's the fire, he knows, it's about the fire, and he sighs into her sighs, holds her as she holds him.

Of course, he says. It hurt, because it hurt you.

That's the only reason?

That's the only reason that matters.

It is the dead of night, and he wakes. He blinks his eyes open and wakes, and she is beside him, and she is not sleeping, and this time, she does not try to hide it.

She smiles, wide, her gaze falling all over him, and she laughs, quietly, placing a hand where he rests over her heart, and I'm sorry, she says, calming, slightly, if I woke you.

You know that doesn't matter.

It does, she insists, but she laughs once more, wrapping her arms around him, flooding him with a rush of warmth, apologizing, I'm sorry, it's too damn early, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

But what is it, he wants to know, what's so funny, what's going on, and she quiets at the question, and there are no more signs of laughter, but she is still smiling his way, sort of, the kind that is both happy and sad all at once, and she says, I've just been thinkin', you know.

About what? he asks.

About how you can be anything, she says. You can be anything you want, but always, every time, you choose to be mine. You ain't got any sense at all, do you?

And he looks at her. She's still holding him, close, tight, her bare skin pressed up against his own body, and she is beautiful, oh, God, she's so beautiful, and he is him, and he cannot touch her lips with his own, and he cannot wrap his arms around her, and he cannot hold her in his hands, but she will not let go, he knows she won't, she doesn't care about any of that, and deep down, he doesn't want her to, not one bit.

And he says, "We've both never had any sense at all, and I hope we never do."

A/N: The following notes have been cut for size. The entire commentary with links can be found on my blog (add the dot com and remove spaces): marshmallowgoop. tumblr /post/159771371722/just-some-authors-notescommentary-regarding-my

Cultural Notes: *A* hoikuen *is a Japanese nursery school, which I wrote Ryuko working at because it was stated at the Complete Script Book Event that "it'd suit [Ryuko] to be a babysitter or something like that" because she "probably can't do jobs that force her to work with customers, but she is good with kids."*

Theme/Character Notes: *"nonsense" was a fic inspired by the incredible prevalence of human!Senketsus in stories where Senketsu is romantically involved. While I have no inherent problem with human!Senketsus, the fact that practically every romantic depiction of him alters his form sends a message, loud and clear: in order to be a "suitable" romantic partner, Senketsu must undergo a drastic change. He cannot be as he is.*

Of course, it's not like this is a ridiculous concept. Pairing a human and clothing together is bizarre as fuck and yeah, not something you can really take seriously. There's nothing traditionally ~aesthetically pleasing~ about this kind of match-up, so it's no wonder that the idea of Ryuko/Senketsu is considered as baseless and wrong as Ginny/Sorting Hat.

But, honestly? Kill la Kill *is a series about naked people saving the world from clothing aliens. I hardly think the idea of two people hooking up when they don't happen to look alike is the weirdest thing here-and I think it has a Good Message.*

Mind you, Kill la Kill *is an anime and attracts audiences in their teens (even if it's technically made for the seinen (older male) demographic). How nice is it for teens to see that hey, you don't have to look "traditionally" hot to be deserving of romantic love?…*

… But, okay, maybe all that's just pointless justification for my own preferences. Fair enough. I just like human/non-human pairings. They are my Thing. And before I wrote "nonsense," I was just sighing, thinking, "The only "proper" way to write Ryuko/Senketsu is to make Senketsu human, and that is very Disappointing."

But then I got reminded that, hey. "Love doesn't have to be all about looking hot together or making out." I thought back to one of my favorite fanfics, "Wake us and we drown," an absolutely beautiful post-series Princess Tutu *fic, where (Princess Tutu spoilers), Fakir and Duck live together and Duck stays a duck… and it's still a wonderfully romantic story. Absolutely nothing about this story feels like some laughable and outrageous Ginny/Sorting Hat deal. It's simply a poetic, gorgeous love story.*

"nonsense" is hardly the quality of "Wake us and we drown" and it's not exactly the same sort of story, either, but what I love about "Wake us and we drown" is that this traditionally attractive man who canonically has a league of fangirls interested in him decides that who he wants to be with most of all is a duck. It doesn't matter what Duck looks like-Fakir loves her always. In "nonsense," I tried to bring across the same idea: Ryuko is beautiful and could choose to be with anyone in the whole wide world, but the person she wants to be with most of all is Senketsu…

… In the end, "nonsense" is largely a story about these two people really understanding that they are good for each other and should stick together no matter what anyone else says or their own horrible fears, but I'll make a particular note about the ending, which features a glaring contradiction. To Ryuko, Senketsu can be anything he wants; after surviving the final battle, Senketsu has "grown" just as Ryuko has, and can become any outfit, and Ryuko is baffled that he always wants to be her outfit. To Senketsu, though, while he can turn into any clothes he may ever want to be, he can't be the one thing he thinks Ryuko should want: human. He can't kiss her or carry her or "look hot" with her and it's ridiculous that she would want him to not

be her wedding dress at her wedding, but the one she would meet at the altar.

But, actually? Senketsu doesn't really want Ryuko to reject him. He likes what they have. They are ridiculous, nonsensical people, but he hopes they always stay that way.

Whether or not "nonsense" succeeds, it was meant to be an attempt at a good love story between Ryuko and Senketsu that doesn't feel like laughable Ginny/Sorting Hat trash and that emphasizes that there's more to love than just physical attractiveness and appeal.

breathe in, breathe out - ?, Satsuki

breathe in, breathe out

It's not like they kept in contact, after the battle.

It's not like he planned to meet her here, of all the places in the world where they could have possibly crossed paths again.

But here she is, he's sure of it, sitting in his usual seat, an *ochoko* pressed against her lips, looking far too formal for somewhere like this, far too nice, and he stands a long, useless moment, wondering if it's a trick of these dim lights or his mind spewing lies.

And then he decides to see for himself.

He steps forward, though really, he knows, it's more like a step back. The town's different, sure, technically, but the bar's certainly not, and he feels it in every step as he inches closer to where she sits. There's still the same tired, weary clientele, and there's still the same owner who fills the place with that strange, overbearing reek of hibiscus that tries and fails to drown out the stench of alcohol and smoke, and still he passes by the same dreary posters of stylish, dolled-up girls that he figures look like something outta Alphonse Mucha's collections, maybe, almost as if they're futile attempts to make this wreck seem classy, but then, he's never been especially good at art.

His seat's in the front, away from the riffraff, and as he nears he's surer than ever that it *is* that woman who's taken it, and so he sits beside her, a smile coming to his lips.

"I thought this place was free from the Kiryuins," he says.

Satsuki Kiryuin does not look up. She simply places down her *ochoko*, now emptied, the ceramic making a gentle *clink* against the

counter.

He goes on, "I also thought a woman like you would have more sense than to waltz into a dump like this looking like *that* ."

Kiryuin doesn't answer, grasping the *tokkuri* beside her, refilling her *ochoko* . The movement is every bit as regal and poised as her appearance suggests, and she sips with the kind of grace that she shouldn't, not when she reeks as much as she does with the reek of alcohol.

"Seriously," he says, "don't you think someone here will recognize you?" He looks her over once more, now that his eyes have grown used to the dim lighting, and yes, he sees, he was exactly right all along. Here *Satsuki Kiryuin* is, the new CEO of REVOCS, wearing a neat, white button-up top and a powdery blue skirt like she's about to pose for a fashion magazine, sipping *sake* in a cheap, crummy bar.

"People see what they want to see," she finally tells him, coolly, not even giving him a mere glance as she places another emptied *ochoko* down on the counter. It *clinks* lightly, and she stares at it, folding her hands, one over the other.

"Would *you* expect to see me here?" she asks. "And, if you saw someone who *looked* like me, would you believe it?"

"Clearly, I *did* believe it."

The smallest glimmer of a smile comes over her lips, only to vanish as quickly as it came. "So you did," she says, and she fills her *ochoko* once more. "You're the only one."

"You don't know that." He looks around them, at the exhausted faces and stooped shoulders and drooping cigarettes. "The people here could be writing tabloids about the irresponsibility of Satsuki Kiryuin."

A half-empty *ochoko* hits the counter with another steady *clink* . "Let them say what they want to say."

She still does not look his way, her gaze fixed anywhere but at him, and he, in a bout of irritation, utters a quiet "damn" before repeating it once more, saying, more loudly than he should, "You're just as cold as ever, aren't you?"

He reaches down for a cigarette himself. "I thought you would have lightened up by now," he goes on, and, with a practiced movement, he lights the cigarette, bringing it to his lips.

Breathe in, breathe out. Smoke fills the space between him and her, but if she notices, she doesn't care. She doesn't flinch, doesn't groan, doesn't sigh.

But she does speak her mind. "Don't give me that," she snaps, her gaze still not fixed on him, but instead down towards the *sake* that remains in her *ochoko.* "After all the trouble you've caused me, I have little reason to be cordial with you now."

He almost loses his cigarette. "Trouble *I* caused *you* ?" he repeats, and he wants to keep going, oh, he could keep going *forever*, but he shuts his mouth when he sees her face.

Satsuki Kiryuin is red and blushing. And surely not from the alcohol, because this is a wholly new development, and her eyes are nearly bulging outta her head, looking all wide and huge in a manner that is so *un* -Satsuki Kiryuin, almost like she's jumped right in front of a top-speed train.

"I-I apologize," she splutters, and she laughs a bit before downing the rest of her *sake*, letting the *ochoko* fall once more to the counter with a *clink* . "Ryuko, she keeps telling me, "You don't gotta be talkin' like that all the time anymore, Sis. Get that stick outta yer ass!"" And she laughs a bit more, but her face isn't smiling, and she still won't turn towards him, and she stares at another emptied *ochoko* with a sigh.

Then, quietly, "She's never forgiven you."

And he doesn't notice it then, but there is a certain gravity to Kiryuin's voice at that moment, a kind of vulnerability she'd exposed. In the days to come, she'd blame the alcohol for it, of course, and claim that it was her drink that led her to say all sorts of things she shouldn't have, but she'd know, too, that it wasn't really the alcohol, no, but the strained laughter she'd hear over the phone, and the tired eyes that haunted her, and the clumsy fingers that kept brushing over the frayed ends of a red scarf.

But he doesn't notice any of it then.

Breathe in, breathe out. Smoke floods the space between them once more, and as it fills him, he thinks to himself that no, he can't *really* blame Matoi for being pissed at him, but, well, he's not exactly the most pleased with *her*, either.

And besides, if they're going here, he sure as hell ain't gonna take guilt-tripping bullshit from *Satsuki Kiryuin* of all people.

So he says, "Well, at least I kicked Matoi's ass for her own good," and he can't help the cruel smile that comes over him as Kiryuin's mouth falls open.

"More than I could say for you," he says.

Tact hasn't exactly been one of his strong points. Kiryuin flinches, slightly, and had it been anyone else, he wouldn't have noticed. But this is *Satsuki Kiryuin*, and any movement that betrays her controlled presence still feels odd and uncomfortable and jarring, even though he's seen panic in her eyes before and heard her frantic, hysterical screams in the not-so-distant past and something so little as a minor tremble should no longer seem like anything.

But it does seem like something, and he notices, but she sits up quite straight afterwards, staring right ahead with more intensity than before, her eyes fixed on the bottles of wine and gin and *sake* and the worn menus.

"You could have killed her," she says, flatly. "You were *going* to kill her. You pointed a gun to my sister's face and you swore you'd kill her."

"And if I did, would you have even cared?" he asks. "She was nothing to you until you learned who she was."

Kiryuin still does not look his way.

"If she died, you would have just shrugged it off, taken her Kamui, and moved on. You know it."

She argues, of course she does, and she does it with the kind of emotional instability he'd sooner expect from her sister than her, spouting out a vicious *No* that rattles him to the core.

"You're *wrong*," she insists, a rawness and a wildness to her voice that is vaguely familiar, but still ugly and unfitting and unexpected, and she says the words so loudly that a few people peer over, eyebrows raised, curiosity piqued, only to turn away as she repeats it, quieter now, "You're wrong. You're *wrong* ."

And she looks at him, finally, a fierce kind of intensity in her gaze that she should not have, not after all she's had to drink. Her lips are a thin line, her eyes narrowed, her fingers curled into fists, and not a bit of her trembles or shakes any longer.

She could kill *him*, looking that way.

Still, he laughs, kind of, a sort of grunted chuckle that doesn't convey a bit of mirth. "Whatever helps you sleep at night," he says.

Her gaze doesn't leave him. "I suppose a monster like *you* wouldn't have trouble sleeping even after threatening a teenage girl's life, would you?"

"No," he repeats. "It was for her own good."

"So you say."

"It was," he insists, and he half-considers taking whatever's left in Kiryuin's *tokkuri* to pour himself even the tiniest bit of *sake* that would help drown out the thoughts that come swimming across his mind in that moment, as he swallows hard, as the memories overwhelm him, as he imagines his sister's battered body and her trembling voice against his ear and the blood she left stained across his cheek and her damn *smile* as she begged and pleaded like Fibers were all that mattered in the world and how Matoi looked just like…

But he doesn't take the *tokkuri* . He sighs, and he too looks to the bottles glistening in the dim lights and the worn-out, wrinkled menus with their faded black characters, and he says, "You saw what happened when that monster consumed Matoi. If I'd shot her before, it would have saved her from that pain."

"And we wouldn't be having this conversation now," Kiryuin grinds out. "Ryuko and Senketsu saved your life. You never should have threatened *him* either."

"Wearing that thing has made you soft," he says. He never expected to fight with *her* of all people on the issue, not after all the trouble he knows she went through with her own Kamui, but here he is.

"Don't try to make that parasite out to be a hero," he goes on, still baffled he even has to state the obvious for *Satsuki Kiryuin* . "It just did what it was made to do. It's incredible that it worked, but I'm not wrong for wanting to destroy it if it went outta line. Good the thing's finally gone now with all the rest of 'em."

Breathe in, breathe out. "Well, better it than your sister, right?"

Kiryuin's grip tightens around her emptied *ochoko* . She could break it, he knows, he's broken plenty of them himself, but she doesn't, just sitting, staring at him, gripping that damn thing too hard for her own good.

"What are you trying to say?" she asks.

"I'm saying," he tells her, ignoring her gaze, "that humans and clothing can't be friends. I was only ever trying to get Matoi to understand that. For her own good."

"For *your* own-"

"And if it'd lived," he says, "it'd only consume Matoi again someday. I'd still kill it now if it'd lived, and still kill her if she resisted, too. I don't give a shit."

Kiryuin's grip only tightens further. Any more, and the *ochoko* is surely going to burst.

But it doesn't.

"I'd never let you," Kiryuin says, through gritted teeth. "I'd never let you kill either of-"

"A Kamui that doesn't have anything to fight for doesn't have any need to exist," he cuts in. "Better end it before it destroys Matoi and ruins the world it supposedly saved, and if I had to kill your sister too, so be it. For her good as much as the rest of the world's. *Any* fate is better than being eaten by that *thing* ."

Finally, Kiryuin's grip around the *ochoko* loosens. She doesn't say what she thinks, then, about the compassion she once heard in Senketsu's voice, and the warmth of his fabric, and the wail of Ryuko's ravaged cries against her, and how her sister had never quite been the same since, and how she wishes she could have known him, too.

Instead, she just smiles, sighing, looking away from him and to the emptied *ochoko* before her, and she says, "All your talk of monsters, and it seems you still miss that *you're* the real monster."

And he smiles right back, and he says, as the smile falls to despair, "There are two things you need to know," and he lists them, quietly, forlorn, maybe, speaking of a foolish woman who dreamed an

impossible dream, who wished for a fantasy that could never be, and it killed her, you see, he says, it killed her, and some dreams are better off unfulfilled, don't you get it?

And Tsumugu Kinagase doesn't say then that's why he can sleep at night, because the truth is that he hasn't been able to sleep since the day he watched the life fade from his sister's eyes, but he implies it, and he cannot smirk a cruel smirk, and he cannot speak loftily about murder, and Satsuki looks at him with the kind of quiet understanding that she should not have.

Breathe in, breathe out.

green apples - Mako, Omiko

green apples

Mako Mankanshoku doesn't know the rules of tennis, but Tennis Club Captain Omiko Hakodate swears that she and the team at Honnouji Academy would be more than happy to teach, of course they would, if Mako would only sign her name and join.

And Mako has never before considered being a part of the Tennis Club (which she figures is because she spent her first year in the Origami Club before Origami Club President Tatamu Otte had her thrown out, disgraced, for folding nothing but paper rabbits), but she finds the Tennis Club uniforms quite cute, and she imagines that she'd look splendid wearing the little white hats, and so she agrees, eagerly, embellishing the *shoku* of her family name with a tiny heart.

"But before you can play," says Omiko Hakodate, spinning her sparkling, dazzling tennis racket, "you must prove to us that you're worthy."

And so it's only just after Mako has handed over her paperwork that she's handed a woven basket and a pair of green tongs (that Mako think almost resemble a frog's webbed feet) and directed right towards the tennis courts.

"See all those tennis balls littering the ground?" Hakodate asks, gesturing to a seemingly-endless stream of fuzzy white and apple green. "Collect them all and then return to me."

And Mako doesn't know it then, but Hakodate had torn a hole in the bottom of her basket only hours before, laughing to her teammates about tricking a loser no-star into using it. And so Mako collects, and collects, and collects some more, but the basket cannot hold anything, not for long, and it's only when the sun starts to fall and

Mako is more eager than ever to return to Hakodate that she notices the trail of tennis balls behind her.

And so when she comes to Hakodate with nothing but a broken basket and green tongs slick with sweat, Hakodate smirks and smiles and laughs to her teammates, pelting Mako with a flurry of tennis balls.

"Punishment," she says, the glass she wears over her eye glinting in the crimson light. "And a reminder to never make such a mistake again."

Or else you'll *never* play.

And Mako's face hurts, oh, it hurts worse than the time her father had destroyed her hair right before the kindergarten entrance ceremony, but she can't find it in her to frown as she walks into the blood-red of the late-afternoon sky, because she's *almost* there, she swears, she's almost in a place where she can really belong.

And so when she recounts the story to her parents as her father rubs salve over her bumps and bandages her sores, she cannot stop smiling, not even as Mom looks to Dad looks to Brother looks to Dog, eyebrows raised, lips downturned, worried, concerned.

And she can't stop smiling as she curls up into bed, either, hugging her blanket close as she imagines herself in a real-deal tennis uniform and holding her own tennis racket, because she doesn't even consider that Hakodate had torn a hole into her basket that day, and doesn't even consider the fact that nothing can fit in something that's flawed, because Mako doesn't even consider mending the tear, not even for a moment, because she instead considers making tennis balls out of fruit-flavored candy, and instead considers *eating* rather than *collecting*, her sheets in her mouth as she thinks it.

She swears she tastes apples.

A/N: Based on pages 31-37 of "Mako's Story" included in Sushio's SUSHIO CLUB LOVE LOVE KLKL.

Latte 0 - ?, Ryuko

Latte 0

A/N: A companion piece to Chapter 7, "Latte," though this story can be understood on its own.

Before he knows, and before Ryuko sleeps nowhere but on the chair she keeps beside him, he can only marvel at how strange and uncomfortable and awful it is, to see what he's never seen before.

Because, he notices, Ryuko's hair has grown longer, and her eyes become tired, and there's this blankness that keeps coming over her, an emptiness, and when she looks at him, he knows she rarely sees.

They sit across from each other, so close he can still smell the croquettes in her breath and the sweat that must be building up on her forehead. He's sure she can make out the stench falling off of him, too, and perhaps he'd be more embarrassed about such a thing on another day, but it's well into summer, now, he figures, and there's not much a person can do. The *sakura* blossoms are long gone, and the cool breeze of spring long gone with them, leaving the air so blisteringly hot that even as they sit surrounded by trees and shade and beneath a decorative white umbrella speckled with tiny red and blue and yellow flowers, he still feels as though he's melting into his seat.

And yet-and he feels himself grow even hotter at the thought-the sight of Ryuko's right hand leaning against the table gets him thinking, for the first time, about how wonderful it would be to hold it like he's seen in movies and read in books, and how nice it would be to feel her skin against his, and her fingers intertwined with his own.

But he doesn't move.

Ryuko hasn't spoken a word to him since they sat down. She has a tall glass of iced coffee before her, but she plays with it more than she actually drinks it, stirring her straw in absentminded circles, the ice making gentle *clicks* as it hits against the sides. They've never had problems talking before, he thinks, and the thought leaves his stomach feeling sick before he's even had a bite to eat, but the *clicks* continue and he thinks some more that no, that's not the truth, not really, she's always been fickle and hot-blooded and stubborn about speaking with him from time to time.

But nothing has ever felt like this, where she's so clammed up she won't even yell at him, and even the long looks she sends his way are glazed over and dead and nothing like her at all.

He's never felt so far away. He's never missed the gentle rhythm of her heart so much, or her breath against his skin.

But he doesn't move.

Ryuko doesn't bother with her straw as she downs a big gulp of her iced coffee. He supposes the ice is melting away so fast that she wants to finish the thing before she's left with a watered-down mess, and, after she swallows, messily, loudly, and puts down her glass with a gentle *tap* against the table, she starts talking, fast, about what everyone else has been up to while he was away, and what he's missed. She and Mako are finishing up their last year of high school, she says, and the schoolwork has been eating Mako alive, and she looks at him strangely when she says that maybe he should join them, that Satsuki would be able to bend some rules and make it work out, because she *did* make you legal, after all, you illegal alien.

And she laughs at her own joke, but it no longer rumbles through him when she does so, and he no longer feels her heartbeat flutter and her blood surge.

He can't find it in him to laugh back.

"But what about you?" he asks.

"What *about* me?" she asks back.

She spins her straw around the glass once more, *click*, *click*, *click.* He hasn't even touched his own complimentary water. Everything tastes strange to him, even something tasteless. Condensation drips down the sides of his glass, wetting the table, and his hand is damp as he rests it on the surface.

"You keep telling me about everyone else," he clarifies, and he wonders if the dampness on his hand is from something other than the water glass beside him. "But you have not told me much about yourself. I want to hear about *you*, too, Ryuko."

And she laughs. She laughs once more, harder now, and once more he's filled with a sense of longing. "Well, I'm right here," she says, smiling, though it is odd, and not quite right. "You can see I'm just fine."

And no, he thinks, *just fine* isn't exactly what he'd call what happened only days ago, when she'd thrown him to the ground as soon as she heard his voice, telling him it wasn't funny, and how much was he paid to do this, and who set him up for it, huh, was it that jerk Sanageyama because that's low even for *that konnyaku* freak, and he'd better get a move on if he didn't want her foot straight up his ass.

She threw up after she realized the truth.

And cried. She cried so hard, and screamed so loud, and swore so furiously, and wouldn't let him touch her, not even once, as though if he did, he'd just fall apart again.

She still hasn't even so much as brushed his shoulder.

"Ryuko," he says, and he wants to take her hand when he says it, to be close to her like he used to, to understand her like he used to, to let her know without words that he only wished for her to be happy,

that he decided that even with the risks, even with everything, that if he could find some way, *any* way, he…

Maybe Ryuko understands him better than he'd thought. She pulls her hand away before he can even move, placing it on her lap, under the table, away.

He swallows the lump building up in his throat. "Ryuko," he says, once more, "are you… are you happy?"

"Happy with *what* ?" she snaps. She glares over her shoulder at the waiting staff. "Can't say I'm happy about this fucking service, right?"

"Ryuko…"

"Don't give me that." She doesn't look at him, but instead focuses on her drink, using her straw now to sip away the last remnants of her iced coffee that has not a single bit of ice left in it.

"Suck it up and stop worryin' about me for once, won't you?" she says, and she cracks a small smile, but it's still not right, he knows, and he wants to argue, and he opens his mouth, and he utters a short *but*, but he doesn't get to go on as their food arrives and she eats ravenously, like she hasn't in days.

He can't help but wonder if it really *is* the first thing she's eaten in days, with the way Satsuki and Mako pushed this…

Whatever *this* is.

"Have you ever tried that before?" Ryuko asks, pointing to the *katsu sando* on his plate, cut up into three neat slices. She's eating her own as she gestures to his, her mouth full, *tonkatsu* sauce and bits of shredded cabbage slipping from the bread and onto her plate, and he sighs and shakes his head *no* .

After all, he only got it because *she* got it. He can't say food appeals to him too terribly.

"Well, it's really good!" Ryuko tells him, and for a moment, he can almost believe her false eagerness, and he cannot bring himself to press her anymore, and bites down into his sandwich.

She never does answer his question, and it's only when they're going their separate ways that she even looks as though she might.

"When will I get to see you again?" he asks, then, wishing, selfishly, that he could go with her, even though the Mankanshoku home is already threatening to burst with people as it is and there's surely no room for him there, not now, not anymore.

She shuffles nervously. It's so hot, but she's still wearing a red scarf around her neck. He doesn't know quite what it is, the feeling that bubbles up inside him as he's filled with the sight of her fiddling with the scarf's ends.

"I don't know," she starts, still keeping her distance, still running her fingers along frayed fabric, and he feels a heaviness inside, feels his heart beat on a bit more quickly. He doesn't want to leave.

Not yet.

"I'm really busy," she goes on. She's not even looking at him now. "With school, and everything. I'm gonna be graduating this year, ya know? I have to study hard, and…"

"And you don't have time to see me," he finishes, for her.

He feels a million miles away. His gaze falls to his feet, at the lines crisscrossing his hands, at the ends of the clothes *he* wears now, at anything other than her. This was supposed to be the right choice. So why-

"Oh, would you suck it up already?" Ryuko cuts in. Well, he thinks, now he's done it. She's shaking her head, her face quite red, though he can't understand the reason why.

"You're a grown-ass adult," she says. "You don't need me holding your hand all the time. Satsuki says yer doing just fine." She laughs. Sort of. "Come on. You've got this more figured out than me."

She shrugs her shoulders. "I'll see you when I see you. Maybe we can grab a latte or something sometime."

With another short, wrong smile, she moves to leave, and he tries and fails to calm his thudding heartbeat, taking in a deep breath before uttering her name.

"Ryuko," he says, again, as she doesn't even stop, as she moves forward without him. His voice comes out scratchy and pathetic, and as his efforts still prove useless, he takes her, gently, by the arm.

"Ryuko, please," he begs.

She pulls away quickly, turning around to face him, a burning glare in her eyes, the kind he's only ever seen her use for Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime, and the world spins, his heartbeat thudding in his ears as his head screams and his body aches and he hates that he ever said anything and hates that he ever did any of this.

" *What* ?" Ryuko snaps. "I have to go home. You have to go home, too. It's getting late."

It's not. It's summer. The days are so long it seems they never end. The sun still hangs high in the sky. It's hardly past dinnertime.

But he gives up. "You're right," he says, but it's more choked-out, really, because he gasps and falls to his knees at that moment, a hand over the heart thudding too quickly in his chest, and Ryuko turns around swiftly at the noise, her eyes wide and panicked, and she screams his name, crouching by his side, placing a hand on his shoulder, her face very nearly pressed against his own.

The last thing he remembers seeing, before he knows, before she squeezes his hand every instance she can as he lies in a bed that is

not is own, is the strange mixture of horror and calm on Ryuko's face then, where she leans against him with despair in her worn gaze but also a glimmer of acceptance in her tears, and yet she mouths words at him anyway, words he can't hear anymore but words that look like an endless string of *You're just fine, you're just fine, you're just fine* .

And then he's gone.

heart hand - Ragyo

heart hand

When you're the villain, and you have the hero's heart clutched in your very hand, the logical, simplest course of action would be, clearly, to destroy it on the spot. A curl of the fingers, a nail run along an artery, and you've won. Hearts are, after all, weak, flimsy, fickle things.

Perhaps, though, Ragyo Kiryuin doesn't quite like to be reminded of such a truth, not when the heart she holds so resembles her own. It *thump thumps* against her palm, rapid, frenzied, and though it is beautiful (surely, she thinks, one of the most beautiful sights in all the universe), there is also the sickening thought that it is as pitiful and disgraceful as a miserable human. One flick of her wrist, and it would be gone. One squeeze against her flesh, and this heart would never beat again.

And it is with that thought she has, in that moment, that Ragyo finally considers the girl to which the heart belongs, and the sight sets her own heart aching. How sad, she thinks, how horrible, that a girl with such a beautiful heart could look so pathetic! Right before Ragyo's eyes the girl trembles and shakes, frightened, helpless, and oh, Ragyo wants to say, you poor dear, it must have been awful, to think you were a mere *human* all this time. She imagines wrapping the girl in her arms, running fingers through her dark hair, cooing, sighing, telling her that All is all right now, that It's only been your feeble mind holding you back from greatness, but worry not, my child, because minds are easily swayed.

And Ragyo Kiryuin knows, of course, that when you're the villain, you are not to be merciful. You are not to be kind. You're to see the poor hero struggling in your grasp, sweating and crying, swearing that what you say isn't the truth, and you're to smile the whole time,

wide, manic. You're to kill her slowly, painfully, cackling all the way, making absolutely certain that the last sound she hears is your laughter, and the last sight she sees your upturned lips, all so that she knows, as she crumples to the ground, as her heart stops in your hand, as her companion holds her lifeless body against his own, that you had beat her, and you had won.

But Ragyo Kiryuin is not the villain.

Ragyo Kiryuin is the hero.

Ragyo Kiryuin simply wants her daughter to understand the truth.

He is Not Her Friend - Gama, Ryuko, Mako

He is Not Her Friend

He is not her friend, but sometimes, if the night is clear enough, and his timing just right, Ira Gamagoori steps out for air and wipes the sweat from his brow just as Ryuko Matoi disappears into the woods not far from where his junior high was, and he raises an eyebrow.

It's not that it's odd, Ira thinks to himself, those nights he catches her, because he's quite fond of those woods himself. They sit right on a hill overlooking Tokyo Bay, and if a man walked long and hard enough, and strained himself to reach the very top, he'd find a quiet spot above everything else, where he could smell nothing but the oil of the town and the salt of the sea, and only the sky would seem to be higher.

Nobody ever really goes up that far, of course, not with a muddy path and a poorly-drawn trail that meanders for miles, but still, Ira knows, it's not odd to spend afternoons within those trees. They're a popular spot for tourists and locals alike, and, more often than not, when he makes his way to its peak, he'll catch sweethearts kissing and sharing lunches at earlier stopping points, where the views of the Bay aren't nearly as nice.

No, Ira thinks, when he finds Matoi one late afternoon on his own way to the top, her legs dangling off the edge of a rock and her eyes set to the sky, what's odd is that Matoi sits in such a spot alone, without Mankanshoku by her side, or anyone else at all.

And he stops a moment, and other hikers pass him as he does so, chatting and boisterous, their dogs in tow, and he catches his breath as they walk by, and he thinks to say something, perhaps, to tell Matoi that if she were to only go a bit further up, there is a much better place to be by oneself, and to look down upon the town.

But he is not her friend.

He says nothing, and she doesn't notice.

It's not summer yet, Ira has to remind himself, no matter how long the days seem, and how hot the air is.

Even the canned coffee he grabbed from the vending machine by the shop down the road is nowhere near as cold as it's advertised, as though even something humans designed to combat the elements cannot prevail against the weather, either.

Still, if his uncle minds, he surely isn't showing it. The man gulps down the sugary, artificial content without care, as if something lukewarm still proves refreshing on a day like this one.

Maybe there's truth to that, Ira considers, dryly, in this sweltering, blistering place, where even thinking correctly is beginning to feel difficult.

Uncle puts the coffee down with a grunt, the can leaning precariously on the pile of iron ore where he sits. His other hand keeps turning around the metal *haramaki* that Ira had made, his worn fingers examining every last inch, his small, black eyes steady and focused.

"Not bad," he says, eventually, still looking it over. "Wouldn't fall apart too easily. Sturdy. Not bad."

Uncle picks up his coffee again, gulping the rest of it down. "It works."

Ira is probably naïve for expecting more, and he is. Uncle stops looking at the *haramaki* at that moment, placing it beside the emptied can of coffee, and Ira figures that the analysis is over.

"Thank you, Sir," Ira says.

"Oh, don't say it like that," Uncle groans. He stands and cracks his back, the *snap* sounding more terrible than ever, and Ira grimaces, silently, knowing Uncle wouldn't listen to any of his concerns. "Worry about yourself first," he'd say. "And don't you dare make your mother cry."

Uncle pulls Ira from his thoughts. "You know," he says, "one of these days, I thought people would stop wanting stuff to kill them, you know?" It's not much of a question, and he's not looking for Ira's answer.

Ira says nothing.

"But here I am, still teaching you," Uncle continues. "Somehow, this business is still going."

"Somehow," Ira agrees.

Uncle picks up the *haramaki* and hands it back to him. "You still got some work to do, though. Maybe when the weather's not so god-forsakenly terrible, I'll feel more motivated to tell you about it."

Ira nods, solemnly. "Thank you," he says, again.

"Don't thank me just yet." Uncle crushes the empty can in his hand with a steely *crinch* . "It's not gonna be fun schooling you on all the things you did wrong with this one."

Ira does not know what to say with that, and so says nothing.

"We'll cross that bridge when it comes," Uncle says for him, with a shrug. He throws the crushed coffee can into the trash meters away, in a perfect arc, and Ira can't help but notice the smallest glimmer of a smile on the corner of his lips as it lands with a *bang* .

"At least you've got people to keep you company while you're stuck here learnin' with me," Uncle goes on. "Those two girls who come by sometimes. Who are they?"

Ira is silent a moment, looking down to the *haramaki* he still holds close to him. Was it really so long ago that *he* was the one wearing this kind of armor, made by his uncle's careful hands? That *haramaki* had been sturdy and strong, and though his blood had been smeared all across it, in the end, and though he knew it could have never been used again, it'd surely saved his life, and is the reason he's standing where he is now, with his own feeble imitation in his hands, in this searing, terrible heat.

His uncle's *haramaki* had gone with everything else, back then, and when he stood without it, looking to the stars, and saw Matoi fall down alone, he knew more than just a piece of metal had been lost that day.

After all, Matoi's cries didn't stop. Not when Mankanshoku comforted her. Not when her own sister did. She smiled, but she cried, for surely she was alone now, truly alone.

And yet…

"They're acquaintances of mine from Honnouji Academy," Ira says, finally, in response to his uncle's question.

Matoi notices him, one late afternoon.

His thundering footsteps as he passes her by catch her attention, and she speaks his name, a mixture of confusion and curiosity in her voice.

Ira stops in his place, looking out towards where she sits.

The weather has calmed. It's partly cloudy, and, in these woods, the air is cool against his face, the sweltering heat of the days before a discomfort of a far gone time. A breeze ruffles Matoi's terrible, unmanaged mop of hair as she returns his gaze.

Ira steps closer. "If you're looking to get away and be alone, Matoi," he says, just as he's considered before, using his very commandeering Disciplinary Committee voice, "there is a better place, just a bit further up. The path is poor, but I can show you the way."

Matoi laughs. "Is that why *you're* here?" she asks.

"Of course," Ira answers. "A man needs a time and a place to think."

"Uh-huh." Matoi shakes her head at him, focusing her eyes upward instead. The sky is slowly darkening, its deep blue gradually shifting into violet and crimson and burnt orange, and the white clouds no longer look so white any longer, now tinted with delicate pinks along their edges.

Matoi never tears her gaze away. "Well," she says, "I don't come here to be alone."

She shrugs, and Ira waits for an explanation, but she doesn't say one, simply clapping a hand over her heart, resting her palm against the red scarf she still wears even this close to summer.

"Thanks, though," she says. "I guess."

Ira goes on his way. "Suit yourself," he tells her, and he leaves her there, just like that.

He's not her friend, after all.

Well, it would probably upset Mankanshoku, if Ira ever said that he and Matoi aren't friends.

They all sit huddled together, the ice cream in Ira's hands melting faster than anyone could ever possibly hope to eat it, but then, Mankanshoku always likes to prove him wrong.

The blisteringly hot days have returned. Ira's taken to carrying his nice jacket ("Why'd you bring one anyway?" asked Matoi), and even something as simple as standing in place still feels like too much. Sweat surely covers every inch of him by now, and, deep down, a part of him almost wishes for the days when they could get away with wearing practically nothing.

Mankanshoku is already crunching on her cone. They're situated on a bench right outside the ice cream shop, in the shade of the trees, but it's not doing much to keep him cool, and he's not so quick to eat as Mankanshoku is. His ice cream's dripping messily onto his hands, surely melting faster than *he* can eat it, in any case, and though he has piles and piles of napkins, they don't particularly help with the stickiness.

Of course, it's air conditioned inside, but it's crowded in there, and none of them are much for crowds, and, well, after Matoi's little outburst…

Ira focuses his attention on her. He can't believe how remarkably calm she is, sitting with her left arm dangling casually over the top of the bench, and her right holding an ice cream shake. Ira wishes he'd had the foresight to choose something that wouldn't melt all over his hands, too, but then, he thinks, almost bitterly, there would be no way she could act so relaxed if she had bits of paper napkin and melted ice cream sticking to her fingers like *he's* dealing with.

But still. What even *was* that, Matoi?

He asks. Or tries to. For a moment, Ira ignores the mess in front of him and stuck to him and he says, solemnly, "I am more than capable of standing up for myself, Matoi."

He's been doing it nearly his entire life, after all. When people mistreat him, or judge him, or the ice cream shop workers take one glance at him and think him an opportunity to practice their English, he knows how to handle it: speak calmly, speak firmly, and look them right in the eyes.

When it'd happened, then, he'd wanted to tell her to calm down, of course, that this sort of thing used to be something of a regular occurrence for him in places where no one knew his name. But Matoi's face had contorted into an ugly rage, and she had her hands balled up in fists, and even her *hair* seemed to be on edge, and when she'd screamed a flurry of curses, and swore that he *ain't no foreigner* and that to treat him that way because of his looks was *fucked up* and *to hell with that*, Ira hadn't the time to say anything as she stormed out of the place, slamming the door behind her, leaving the employees flustered and Mankanshoku looking to the ground and the customers' eyes wide and interested.

Mankanshoku picked up the shake for her, once it was done.

Now, Matoi's air of calm has faded. She's tense, squeezing her shake tight. "You're wrong," she says, vehemently. "You wouldn't stand up for yourself *right.* You don't know how to-"

"Soooo!" Mankanshoku breaks in. She's crunching the ends of her cone now (and Ira can't help but marvel at her speed, no matter the situation), smiling bigger than she ought to. "Where d'ya think we should head next, huh?"

She has her backpack by her side, and she unzips it to remove a map. One hand still holding the last bits of ice cream cone, she uses the other to flatten the map on her lap.

"What d'ya think of this place, huh, Ryuko?" she asks, pointing to a place that none of them can really see. "They have lots of nice stuff there, I heard! I read it…"

Matoi relaxes once more. She smiles, and loosens the grip on her paper cup. "Ahh, wherever you want to go," she says, with a shrug. She takes a sip of her lemon-cream shake, letting terrible *pshshshs* fill the air. "We've been everywhere I wanted to go."

"You just wanted to get ice cream!" Mankanshoku cries. "Don't you want anything else?"

Matoi shakes her head, her smile only growing bigger, more sincere. "Don't *you* want to save some of your money for when we go shopping with Satsuki later?"

Mankanshoku frowns, furrowing her brows. "I… guess that's a good point," she agrees, hesitantly. "But we can still take a look, can't we?"

"Of course, of course," says Matoi. "Whatever you want to do." She turns to him, her eyes narrowed. "Right, Gamagoori?"

Ira manages a nod. Maybe Mankanshoku's right. No use getting Matoi riled up. No use starting more useless fights.

He sighs, looking down. There's also little use in finishing this ice cream, he thinks, but there's no honor in throwing away something half-finished. He eats the rest in the most ungraceful display, and then they're off, away from this place.

The store Mankanshoku suggested is small. Ira barely fits through the door, and there's not much selection to be found (and scarcely a thing that interests him), but somehow, that woman finds ways to point at every little thing, asking his opinion, and Matoi still finds ways to be distracted.

Her eyes linger too long on a sailor uniform on the rack.

"You know," Ira says, turning to Mankanshoku, who has piles of clothes in her arms, "maybe we've had enough shopping for the day, don't you think? It's getting late."

And maybe Mankanshoku notices his tone, because she looks to Matoi, who's still staring, as if transfixed, only to turn away, slowly, hesitantly. She looks towards them at the sound of his voice, but she avoids their eyes, fiddling around with the red scarf on her neck, and Ira is sure that she is completely unaware that she does that every time she gets nervous.

They have all heard her excuses before. "Yeah," she says, "you know, I have somewhere I need to be." She laughs, like it's a guilty thing, her fingers still wrapped around her scarf. "I'll see you two later."

Matoi's gone before she can see Mankanshoku's disappointed face, and Ira puts a comforting hand on Mankanshoku's shoulder, and sticks with her as she places all the clothes she'd considered back, and stays by her side as she walks home, uncharacteristically quiet, kicking the tiny pebbles that litter their way.

When the two arrive at her front door, she pauses before going in, frowning, sighing. "I'm worried," she admits, and it's the kind of tone she rarely uses, and Ira stiffens. "About Ryuko."

Mankanshoku won't look towards him. "She hasn't been smiling much," she goes on, quickly. "And when she does, it's like… it's like she's doing it just to make me happy." Mankanshoku shakes her head. "I don't know what to do. I hate seeing her this way."

Ira is quiet a moment, unsure of what to say, to do. He's never seen Mankanshoku so lost, because Mankanshoku always knows the right course of action and always knows how to make Matoi smile again-and if she doesn't, well, she at least tries *something* .

But now she's not trying anything.

So Ira says, "You're always able to cheer her up, Mankanshoku," because surely if she only spoke with Matoi, she could iron out the kinks between them.

But Mankanshoku shakes her head again. "Not *always*," she admits. "And nothing's working anymore, and I…"

She finally looks up to face him. "You're a good friend, Gamagoori. Maybe you know how to talk some sense into her."

Ira can't help the blush that comes over his cheeks, and though he wants to say no, that he hasn't a clue how to speak with Matoi, he knows, too, how much that girl means to Mankanshoku, and he nods his head seriously.

"I'll try, Mankanshoku," he swears, and her face lights up, and she hugs him, whispering words of thanks into his ear.

At the very least, Ira thinks, he knows where Matoi's wandered off to.

It's a bit of a way from Mankanshoku's home-and from town-and her footprints are already covered over with others as Ira follows the trail himself.

And when he finds her, right where he expects her to be, she looks as though she hasn't moved for hours. She clutches her knees, her head up towards the sky that slowly darkens above her as the sun dips down, hovering right above the sea, sending ripples of color across the water.

It'd all be very beautiful, if she were only looking. Ira only needs a moment to realize that the soft sound he hears is the gentle whimper of Matoi's sobs, and that she can't truly be looking to the sky at all.

He speaks her name, rushing by her side.

Matoi turns to him at the noise, revealing a face streaked with tears. Her eyes are bloodshot and puffy, and she chokes as she sees him, struggling to keep her sobs down.

"What do you want?" she asks, and Ira is well aware that, once upon a time, she'd very nearly push him off this cliff for even coming to see her like this. But now she just stares, cold and hard.

Ira passes her an old handkerchief of his mother's. The least he can do, he thinks, though he doubts Matoi would ever take anything of the sort from *him* .

And yet she does, gripping the fabric tight.

"Mankanshoku is worried about you," Ira says, and Matoi tenses up, holding the handkerchief tighter, keeping her face away from him.

"I'm just being stupid," she tells him. "I shouldn't even be cryin' like this." She glares at him. "And *you* shouldn't be here. This shouldn't be happening."

Ira doesn't flinch. "It *is* happening, Matoi."

"Fuck, I *know that*," she says. She draws her legs closer to her chest, burying her face in her knees, truly hiding her face from him.

"This is *sdupid*," she repeats. "Just… go away."

Ira doesn't move. "It's only been a month," he says. "There is no shame in mourning."

"You're wrong." She says it as though the notion is poison, lifting her head once more. Her tears have stopped, leaving behind only the stains and a morbid, red-tinged glare. "It's *been* a month. I shouldn't be cryin'. He's out there. And in here." She places a hand over her heart. "And someday, I know we'll… I know I'll see him again."

"You miss him."

Matoi shakes her head. "But I *shouldn't*," she says, smiling cruelly.

Ira looks away from her for a moment, down to his hands. His fingers are cut open in several places by now, and the skin so rough and calloused that any softness they must have once held seems as distant and far away as his life before his silver earrings. The work he does is hard, surely, he thinks, but then, it was the *haramaki* that such work created that had saved his life.

Had saved Mankanshoku.

And he says, "There is no shame in missing him."

Matoi shakes her head once more. There are rocks gathered up at this point of the trail, and she grabs them, one by one, throwing them from the cliff, swiftly, messily, unpracticed.

"You know what he said, when he died?" she asks. She throws more rocks off, and fistfuls of grass and dirt. "He told me to get over it."

She's crying, struggling to gather up sticks or pebbles or weeds or any object at all to throw away, standing on trembling legs, her fingers grasping for something, *anything* . "But it gets better!" she says. "Then he said all this crap like, "I'm glad I met you! I had fun!""

Matoi laughs a strained laugh, falling back down again, breathing hard. Her legs dangle over the side of the cliff, and she won't look a bit his way. "It's all BS," she goes on, quieter, now. "I never even got to say that I'm sorry."

It's a wonder she hasn't thrown away his handkerchief. The tiny fabric still sits beside her, on the cliff, ruffling dangerously in the breeze. As Matoi collapses into a mess of sobs, Ira takes it once more, holding it close, but this time, she doesn't accept.

"Matoi," he says, folding the handkerchief in his pocket, "is that what this is really about?"

"What?"

"You're guilty."

She scoffs. "No one can live without regrets."

Ira lets his own legs dangle over the edge of the cliff. The sun dips down lower and lower, the air growing cooler, the sky darkening, falling into deep indigos and violets. Matoi keeps her distance, covering her face, and though she has quieted now, he still sees the way her body trembles, and knows that she wants this whole thing to end-and the quicker, the better.

But Ira won't let this go that easily.

"You're an idiot," he says.

Matoi lifts her head furiously. " *What* was that?!"

"You're an idiot," Ira repeats. *Now* she's paying attention to him. That glare in her eyes is truly admirable.

She scowls. "Now, listen here," she says, "you-"

"You see, Matoi," Ira cuts in, "a real man would never dedicate himself to a lady he did not respect. Do you really think your Senketsu would do everything he did, and not have meant it?"

Matoi falters. "That's not…" she tries, "that's not the…"

"He never regretted it. He never regretted *you*," says Ira, and he stands, holding out a hand. "Now, wipe your own tears, and come with me. There's a better place further up, to see the stars."

Matoi only agrees, hesitantly, as her eyes fall to the darkening sky, and when they walk, she is silent, wiping away at her face and her tearstained cheeks. But when she sees the stars, at the top of the hill, her eyes light up, and she holds a hand over her heart.

And though she does not whisper words of thanks, Ira Gamagoori knows in that moment that he is her friend.

A/N: This has so many references to the Elite Four Light Novel.

Go Back - Ryuko, Senketsu

Go Back

The room reeks of shit and toilet and wet dog, and she's been in there way too long.

Any moment now, Ryuko knows, there'll be a series of *thumps* on the door and an all-too-chipper voice telling her to get a move on, insisting that they can't be late for their first day.

And, if she had any patience for it, she'd count the seconds in her head 'til she'd expect to be interrupted, but she doesn't, not a bit, so she simply stands and stares, unmoving, silent, looking intently before her-well, as best she can with that flimsy yellow light that doesn't illuminate much of anything, anyway.

Her eyes can't leave the mirror. It's a pitiful thing, of course, cracked along its edges and too small for the space, and to gaze upon it for so long is a surely ridiculous waste of time-especially when it's always been murkier than even Ragyo Kiryuin's sense of morality. No matter how much Mrs. Mankanshoku scrubs it down, everything reflected in the glass never fails to look tinged in a dark, putrid green that conceals the details of your face and blurs reality, destroying colors and twisting them into something else altogether.

But none of that really matters now.

Now all that matters is that the fabric she's got pulled over herself-the pleated skirt, and the crimson scarf that the mirror makes mahogany, and the puffy white blouse that seems olive instead-well, it looks awful on her.

"Not cute at all," she whispers aloud. "I really suck at this "making you jealous" thing, don't I?"

A hand falls to her heart, and she pulls away from the mirror, sliding down against the door. She shuts her eyes. Breathes in deep. Leans her head against the creaky wood.

In that heartbeat fluttering too fast against her palm, and somewhere deep in that sound he loved- *loves* -there's a question that he never asked, begging for an answer.

Would you go back?

After all, there's just something about *lies.*

They taste like chocolate cake, see. And not just any chocolate cake. *Good* chocolate cake, with three layers, and fudge frosting, and candles on the top, just for her.

Lies are fucking delicious.

Truth, on the other hand, well. Truth tastes like a bloodied lip. Truth is full of iron and mud, and the way they'd looked at her back then, back when she truly realized that she was *not right*, back when her fists were bruised and the pink of her shirt had been smeared with red.

Swallowing bit after bit of that cake, in a world that didn't exist, in a place of dreams, it got easier. It was fake, it was lies, but it was *chocolate*, damn it.

So much better than blood.

At least, that's what a part of herself can't stop saying.

Ryuko had said, once-well, *screamed*, more like-that the days they spent together weren't going anywhere. The memories still cling to her even now, and sitting there on the bathroom floor, she can't imagine her new classes and her new teachers and the way all will

look at her in her new school uniform, because she can only imagine sitting on a ship instead, her legs dangling over the sides, her heart full of something she can't quite explain, not even now.

The scenario unfolds before her: *He's* right there, as warm and comforting as always-maybe even *more* so-and she clings to him despite herself, holding him closer than she ever has. She wishes things were simple, and wishes it could be just that, but her mind's wandered and gone off to places she doesn't want it to go, and her hunger vanishes, as though it had never been there at all, the sweet flavors in her mouth contorting into something bitter, vile.

A croquette's still locked between her chopsticks, but she sets it down right fast after that, and then the plate's off her lap, too, settling itself on the deck of the ship with a tinny *clank.*

Goose bumps race up her arms, and she can't help that, and she can't help his staring at her, either, but mostly she can't help how the ocean's not really the ocean anymore, and how she can't see water stretching out before her now, because in its place there's a church, and a white dress, and streams of scarlet drenching her face, falling into her eyes.

It's just like him to pull her out of it.

"Ryuko?" he asks.

She sighs. The night sky and dark sea come drifting back. It's impossible to focus her vision on it, but she tries anyway.

"I'm full," she tells him, as explanation for the cast-off croquettes.

He argues, just as she knew he would. "But," he tries, "you-"

"I eat too many of these things anyway, right?" She lets her hands fall from him to the cool metal of the deck, and she leans back as she turns her attention instead towards the sky. "Greasy food's bad for me and all. I thought you'd be happy about it, Senketsu?"

And gets fussy about that, of course he does, groaning and gasping without any words coming out, and she can laugh at that, and she does, no matter how much her head whirls and her stomach aches.

But when the laughter falls away, she can't help herself.

"I meant what I said back there, you know?" she says. "You and Mako don't make any sense. I mean, it's like, after everything, you still…"

The words fail her.

And as those *thumps* start rattling against the door, they still do.

He already knew the answer. He would.

But she didn't, not really, and she couldn't ask it, couldn't bring herself to.

So she sat there looking up at the stars, lost, maybe, thinking on snapshots, on memories, on the old crumpled photograph she shoved away in her drawer, and her father's stooped back, and how cold that blue umbrella looked that day, back when the rain kept falling and her lip kept on bleeding.

It's a story she's told only him.

When she was young, and when it was boarding school that kept her locked away, there was once a new girl.

The new girl didn't have a father, and her mother was barely out of high school, and only her rich grandparents made it so that she could come to their school at all. She was a disgrace, an embarrassment, and nobody could possibly want her, and so the students didn't want her, either, and the new girl was pushed and

shoved and mocked and teased, because she deserved it, of course she did, for daring to be what she was.

Least, that's what everyone said.

But Ryuko never cared about any of that, and when she saw the blue umbrella fallen to the ground, she broke into a run, her little hands balling up into fists.

The other girls said it was an accident. They'd *accidentally* fallen into the new girl, and accidentally made all her belongings go tumbling in the rain, and accidentally knocked her to the mud, and accidentally kicked more on her as they left. By accident.

Ryuko got them all running away in moments. They only managed a cut on her lip and a splash of blood against her shirt, and she smiled as she held a hand out to the new girl, still on the ground, still getting drenched in the rain.

"They won't be bothering you anymore," Ryuko said, proudly.

But the new girl only scowled. She flicked Ryuko's hand away, gathered up her things herself, and she stood, defiant, not even bothering to wipe away the mud.

"I never asked for your help," she said. "Now they'll never leave me alone."

And she repeated that word, with the same look in her eye as all of those who had knocked her over in the first place.

Freak.

Ryuko stood watching a long time as that blue umbrella faded from view.

It was dark and navy, but not in the same way she knows now.

It was cold. Cold and lonely.

So when the veil's in her hair, and her arms are draped in white, and when she's standing at the altar, none of it exists anymore.

None of the stares. None of the names. None of the *we love you's* that she doesn't deserve.

All that exists is the joy that she's doing something right. That she has a purpose.

There are no nightmares about her father's back. There is nothing in her head about how he never turned around, and how he never looked her in the eye as he abandoned her.

There are no cold, navy blue umbrellas.

There also aren't any croquettes, though. Or motorcycles with busted-up gas gauges. Or a bowl with her name on it, or too-tight bunny pajamas.

And there's definitely not a certain fluttering in her heart as he tells her, gently, "That's the kind of person you are."

Back then, she doesn't have to finish.

"Of course," he says. "I'm with you."

It's a sentiment he's told her before. So why are the stars blurring this time, and why is his warmth becoming too much, and why is there that question ringing in her mind, the one he'd never ask but she wishes he would, the one that she desperately wants to convince herself she has the answer to?

Would you go back?

After all, he'd thrown aside his life for her, when her mouth only ever seemed to spout insults his way. And that girl jumped out to save her when she had no right to.

And she'd hurt them both.

And now he's *gone* .

Mako's getting anxious. "Ryuko!" she cries, just as expected, right on cue. "Come on! We can't be late on our first day!"

Ryuko swallows hard, stands. Her reflection stares back at her, the uniform as hideous as ever.

"I'll be right there," she says.

In the memory, she feels his eye looking up at her.

"What is it?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "Nothing, nothing!" she tells him, and maybe he won't notice the wetness on her cheeks as she says it, or how hot she feels, or how quickly her heart's fluttering, and maybe it doesn't matter that there's no way he *wouldn't* notice.

"I'm just glad to be back," she goes on, quietly. A hand falls over his eye, her heart. "Thank you."

When Ryuko opens the door, Mako tumbles right onto the ground and springs back up to her feet in seconds.

"Ah, you look so cute, Ryuko!" she gushes, and she stands right beside her, smiling big into that murky glass.

There's light pouring in from that open door now, light that's from the rising sun, and the colors don't look dark and drab with that, but bright, bloody.

And still terrible.

But there's a blush creeping up on her cheeks from the compliment anyway, and before she can say anything about it, Mrs. Mankanshoku pokes her head in, beaming at them both.

"You girls better hurry up!" she says, and she hands them each homemade lunches, smiling, and Ryuko can't help but smile as well.

Surely the *bento* is much too big for her.

Falling from the stars, there were many things Ryuko wished she could have said.

It's not until she's waiting on Mako, lunch break on their first day of their third year, that she says what she always wanted to say the most.

A hand's over her heart and her eyes are up to the sky and for a moment all she sees is chocolate cake and candles and all she hears is wedding bells ringing.

But only for a moment. Then the sky's that great expanse of warm navy blue again, and she shuts her eyes. Breathes in deep. Whispers.

I had a wonderful time meeting you, too.

A/N: A nearly 2-year-old story written as a response to an anonymous prompt concerning the question of whether or not Ryuko would ever wear Junketsu again.

Though the piece has been lightly edited for this upload, it is admittedly a rather weak construction. Still, I thought it worth adding to Strings and Threads *as a sort of Throwback Thursday deal- hopefully it's evidence of how much I've grown as a writer since 2014!*

fee - Senketsu, Ryuko

fee

The night Senketsu dies, and he is drenched in tears that are not his own, he swears that it will not be the end.

And so, it is not.

He wakes in the morning, in a bed that is not his own.

Sunlight falls over him as though all is the same. The windows are still cracked along their edges, haphazardly taped over to keep out the cold, and the curtains are pulled back, as though to let him see, fully, with both eyes, this room dripping in the crimson light of an early-morning sun.

And so he sits up, and looks, and sees what he would expect. Across from him is the doctor's old T-shirt, patched over where it always has been, and the same sliding doors are there, too, worn and faded, marred with dark stains, and a metal hanger still dangles from the closet door, sparkling, glinting.

He stands abruptly at the sight, pulling away the polka-dotted blanket, walking with wobbling legs and uncertain feet.

There's a smell he doesn't recognize, full of vegetables he's never eaten and meat he's never tried, and as he comes closer, and pulls open the sliding doors, there she is.

A sigh of relief leaves him. No, she is not the same, not now, not with her hair tied back, and the scars he's kissed on the back of her neck showing clear as day, and an apron wrapped sloppily at her waist, and her eyes steady and focused on a pot over the stove, but at the

sound of her name from his lips, and at the sight of him standing before her, a great light comes over her face, and he knows, more than anything, that he is home.

Ryuko Matoi doesn't speak of her hands in his, and doesn't speak of the embrace she would not let go, and doesn't so much as mention that it was her strong arms that had carried him all the way back here.

She says, "You gotta try some of this," and she gestures, almost timidly, to the simmering concoction with a wooden spoon. "It's the kinda thing I'm used ta eatin' on New Year's, but close enough, right?"

"Close enough," he agrees.

Of course, the memories are still fresh in his mind.

Them, falling.

Him, reaching for her.

Her, taking his hands into her own.

Him, wanting to be more than he was, but not *this*, not so weak, not so fragile, not with skin that would break, with bones that would shatter.

And her, crying, her wet face pressed against his chest, her lips over his heart that won't stop beating, her body warm and comforting and full of life in a place where there should be none.

And him, thinking, *If my body unravels, then so be it.*

He can't remember anything, after that.

Her fingers trace over the scars that run down his right eye, the lines x-shaped, etched deep into his skin.

She voices quiet questions, and he spills out gentle answers.

"I swore to everyone that your first meal was gonna be *gameni*," she says. "It's *my* favorite, so you'd better like it, too!"

She doesn't explain that she's never cooked it herself before (or that she's never really cooked much at all), and that she had sliced her fingers, twice, once in the midst of peeling the burdock root and again as she peeled the carrots, and she doesn't say, either, that she had burned her hands when she'd dropped the bamboo shoots into the boiling water, and that Mrs. Mankanshoku had then taken the wounded fingers into her own and said, Oh, dear, please calm down, I know you can do this.

She doesn't explain the dark circles under her eyes, or the slight quiver in her voice, but she doesn't need to explain, and he thanks her.

Before long, she sets a plate before him, and hands him chopsticks, but his fingers have never held them before, and he struggles a long moment, fumbling, before she holds his hands in hers and pulls the chopsticks away.

"You're hopeless," she says, and she uses the chopsticks herself, gathering a bit of chicken and potato and *shiitake* mushroom to press to his lips. "Come on, it's good!"

He eats. The vegetables and the chicken slide against his tongue and he eats, slowly, unsure, chewing what he can only describe as tasting heavy and massive and stringy and wet. There are too many flavors he's never tasted, too many ingredients he's never touched, and it's overwhelming, dizzying, and when he swallows, it feels as though a snake is slithering down his throat, and he chokes, as though that would force it out.

It does. It hasn't even been a minute since Ryuko pushed the food into his mouth and already he's fallen away from the table, vomiting, her *gameni* escaping just as soon as it had come in, spilling all across the floor.

What a mess, he thinks.

And it is.

He wakes in the evening, in a bed that is not his own.

She is there. Her hand's in his. She won't look his way.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't know you couldn't… that you still needed…"

And he notices, all at once, a *guinomi* beside him, filled to the brim with red.

The humans, they all talk.

He'll need more to sustain him like that, they say. He'll need more than Ryuko could ever survive.

No, it could never kill *her* .

But she'd suffer. She'd hurt.

He wouldn't want that.

He should have thought of that before.

But what about other people? What about something else, huh, like pigs, or chickens, or fish, or cows?

No use.

Rejection.

She's the only one.

Why her?

Why *me* ?

And as he watches the needle break her skin, her eyes turned away, he knows that there are no answers.

Maybe he doesn't need answers.

He never used to be afraid of heights. Once, he had loved to fly. But now, he feels no joy at the thought, no rush of exhilaration, no laughter that is not his own that rumbles through him as though it is. All he can think on is the night he died and she held him and refused to let go and how everything he'd thought would justify his existence and everything he'd thought would make her smile again had unraveled before his eyes.

So when he stands at the top of what remains of Honnouji Academy, his head aching, his breath coming too fast, he's certain that he won't forget what he needs to do, and that he can never turn back.

He pulls. All the red threads inside him, all the red threads he used to make this body, to prove that he was deserving of life, to say that he can't go yet, to be what she deserved, he tugs on them and rips them from their place, his fingers streaked pink-and-white, the pain more than anything he's ever known, except one thing.

And that pain finds him, too, as Ryuko shouts his name, and cradles what's left of him, his threads piled beneath the remains of his legs, spilling from the stumps, motionless, useless.

And he realizes, as he is drenched in tears that are not his own, as he wishes to tell her that he was going to make it better, that he was

going to bring back everything they had, that he was going to return to how he was, that maybe there is a limit to how many times threads can be resewn, and a soul can be reborn, and even a phoenix can rise from its ashes.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "Senketsu, having taken on a humanoid form made of Life Fibers, tries eating normal human food. It does not go well." Prompt suggested by argentdandelion.

can't even remember yesterday - Sen, Ryu

can't even remember yesterday

He smells the blood before he sees it and he swears he tastes it before he touches it and it is sweet and warm and bubbling with life and familiar in a way he can't remember.

Why can't he remember?

He stops in his place for a long moment, his heart fluttering. Footsteps fill his ears, uneven and scraping against the forest floor, and when he turns around, he sees behind him a woman he knows, he thinks, he's sure, though he can't say *how* it is he knows her.

But something starts in him at the sight of her bright blue eyes, something that brings back the words he has been following this whole time and something that brings back to his mind those mixed-up memories of a great fire and a pain in his eye that can no longer see and then that strange man with the hair like the sky, saying those words, over and over, *Find her, find her, if it's the last thing you do.*

You, he says, but she says it first, her voice harsh and unkind and breathy and tired and uttered as her trembling hands reach for her blade. She points it his way, shaking still, red dripping down her *hakama*, down her face, down skin and fabric, down, down, down.

He forgets his hunger. He forgets all his questions, and the fact that none can ever hear him speak. He opens his mouth and sound falls out, messily, the words tripping over each other as he says, without thinking, without knowing what it is he is even saying, I thought you were dead, I have been searching for you, and I thought you were dead, I thought you were *dead,* I thought I would never see you again.

Unlucky for you, answers the woman, her blade still pointed his way, but she cannot hold it up, and it falls to the ground, and so does she, and he is by her side in moments, muttering her name that he doesn't know how he knows, leaning her body against the rough bark of a tree, watching as the blood blossoms, and he says, You need help, what are you doing here, what were you thinking?

He tears the fabric of his sleeves and cuts it into strips with his teeth and pushes past her bloodied hands and cries telling him to get lost, to never touch her, pulling open her *hakama* where there is more blood than he's ever seen, ever *known*, dripping, falling, running to the ground in rivers.

You'll die if I don't help you, he manages to say. What were you thinking, what were you *thinking*, running out here, so recklessly, without even attempting to stop the bleeding?

The words feel as usual to him as the lump building in his throat and the sting he feels in his eye, and even as she continues to shove at him, he holds his ground, tearing away more fabric, emptying all his water onto her chest, pressing the once-white sheets of his own clothing against the endless red as she screams for him to stop, to get away, how dare you, how dare you, *how dare you* !

I'd rather *die*, she says, spitting in his face, wrenching his hands from her wounds, than ever be helped by the likes of *you* .

It is only that comment that makes him stop. He pulls his bloodied fingers away, and he doesn't know why he does, and he doesn't know why he's doing any of this at all, and he doesn't know why there's an aching sensation filling up inside.

She looks satisfied at his pause, the smile on her face as confusingly familiar as the blood on his hands, her chest rising and falling far too quickly as she smirks his way, her wound only half-covered, and still bleeding.

That's right, she says, and her seeming delight shifts quickly to bitter hatred. Just let me *die*, won't you?!

She clutches his arm, as though to steady herself, and though she does not look his way, he sees, for the first time, tears coursing down her cheeks.

I couldn't work for her, she says. She could be no master of mine, no matter what Father said, because she killed him, I know she did, and she killed him because of *you* !

He is silent. She is silent, too, no longer struggling as he returns to bandaging her wounds for reasons he doesn't understand, her hand falling away from his arm, her face still turned far away.

He knows, of course, that there are too many questions he has for her. He knows there are questions he doesn't know why he is asking, questions about how she survived the fire, or how long he had been searching for her, and then there are questions that he cannot fathom at all, questions about how in the world she can hear his voice, or how it is she found *him*, deep in these woods, bloody and injured and surely near death, or how it is that he is not hungry at all, even with how thin he's grown since he's last seen her, and with how much he has been suffering ever since?

But he asks nothing, because all that matters is making sure she survives, and as her breathing calms, she asks him instead, quietly, Why do you even care, huh, why are you helping me at all?

And in a time to come, he would say, Because you are reckless and you wouldn't get anywhere if not for me, even though deep inside, he would wish to say, Because I *love* you, can't you see?

But today is not a time to come, today is today, and he can't even remember yesterday, and he looks at her, and he knows she should be nothing more than food to him, and knows that he has no reason to help someone who pushes away at his touch, who doesn't *want* his help, who he doesn't even *know*, but somewhere within him

there's the feeling that he could never leave her behind, but he doesn't know why, he doesn't know anything, and he says, Because…

And he cannot finish.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "Ryuuketsu, feudal-era Japan between two ronin *that happen to cross each other's paths." Prompt suggested by aguagi.*

cream and ivory - Ryuko, ?

cream and ivory

Ryuko Matoi wakes someplace she doesn't recognize, one name spilling from her lips.

She rushes to sit up, quickly, messily, hastily. The creamy, ivory sheets in the fine, wide bed she'd been placed in shift at the movement, rustling more loudly than any fabric ought to, falling away from her body and piling up by her thighs, but Ryuko gives none of it any mind, reaching her fingers out towards the empty space before her, grabbing helplessly at thin air, as though *she* could really save him, or could really save anyone at all.

Her arm falls. Her cries become whispers. There is nothing to hold and nothing to bring close, and she knows that, of course she does. What was she even thinking?

His voice is gone, and his warmth gone with it. Deep beneath her and inside her, there is only cold, hard emptiness where there should be comfort and shelter, and she dares not look down, her eyes stinging as she instead takes in the room around her.

The space is pristine and flawless and white and scarcely decorated, but something about it feels grander than anything Ryuko has ever experienced-and more menacing. The glossy floor tiles shine too brightly, and the silver bed frame she sits in is surely *not* a cheap plastic imitation, and everything seems too much, too radiant, and she shuts her eyes once more, as though that would save her.

What in the world had she done?

Her mouth is dry. She can't remember the night before, and the dream… well, the dream has *never* felt so real. Of course she knew

it was just her nightmare, of course she did, *of course she did,* but every hitch in his voice, every wound he suffered, every *slash* of the sword, every scream-it was as though she were right there, more than it ever had been. It was as though she were once again helpless.

It was as though she were once again *useless.*

Ryuko can still hear his cries in his mind. It doesn't matter that every bit of her knows it's a dream and embarrassing illusion. She still can't shake his desperate pleas, and she still can't shake the soreness she feels all over. Her throat still aches, feeling ugly and raw, and she wonders faintly if she's screamed in her sleep again.

Her stomach turns, knowing that this time, Mako couldn't have been there to shake her awake, and her whole family couldn't have surrounded her with wide, concerned eyes, and he couldn't have said, gently, *I'm here.*

Thinking on it just makes everything worse. Her breathing won't calm. Her heart continues to thud deep inside, racing. She balls her hands up into fists, the sound ringing in her ears, knowing that *he* can't even hear this stupid rhythm he says he loves so much, and *he* can't yell at her to calm down, and…

Her heart only beats faster. *Thump thump, thump thump.*

And Ryuko knows she can't just sit around here anymore.

Without wasting another moment, against her better judgment, Ryuko forces her eyes open once more and looks down.

And her breath promptly leaves her.

It's even worse than she could have ever imagined. Waking up in a strange place in nothing but her striped underwear would be one thing. Waking up in a strange place buck naked with nothing but a blanket over her would be another thing.

But waking up wearing *the* most extravagant, frilly, glamorous dress she's ever seen, with snowy feathers around its collar, and sparkling, silky fabric that hugs her body *much* more closely than she's comfortable with, is surely the worst of all.

Ryuko could throw up, at the sight. Never in a million *years* would she wear something so gaudy and tasteless, and wherever she is-and whoever has done this to her-is going to get the *shit* kicked out of them.

But Ryuko can't remember the night before. All she knows is his fallen body, and her…

She doesn't know. She doesn't know anything.

And maybe, if her head wasn't so messed up, Ryuko would have noticed the delicate *clink* of metal much sooner, and would have noticed that no matter how grand and wide and white and sparkling the room is, or how fine the bed she'd found herself in happened to be…

The door opens, when she calls his name once more.

"Senketsu, Senketsu, Senketsu!" comes a voice Ryuko knows too well, the tone light and airy and dripping with mockery and ridicule. "I swear. Your clinginess to that thing is *sooo* gross. I'm gonna barf!"

A girl steps close to Ryuko's bed, her bright pink dress seeming somehow dulled in this space, diminished by the bright lights and dizzying emptiness. Every *click* of her boots sounds ten times louder than it should, echoing against the barren walls and ceiling, and she smiles a smile so cute and innocent that Ryuko wishes more than anything to place hands around the girl's thin neck as she demands answers to everything.

But somehow, she manages to control herself. Ryuko feels her anger deflate around her.

There's only one thing that matters right now.

"Where is he," Ryuko manages to grind out. It's not a question, and she tries-and fails-to rise to her feet at the words. She may not have her blade, she knows, but she has her fists, and she *swears* she'll make that enough.

She'll make that *more* than enough.

But she can't move. Her legs seemed glued to the silky, expensive sheets beneath her, and when she tries to wrench her arms towards the girl before her, she's met with a tug and a *clink* of metal that is both sickening and terrifying all at once, ringing in her ears like a siren.

And then Ryuko sees the cuffs around her wrists, linked to a chain hooked to the head of her bed.

Nui Harime laughs. "Oh, c'mon, Sis," she says, stepping closer and closer to where Ryuko sits, her boots *clicking* methodically, smiling a smile so wide it seems to fill her entire face as she watches Ryuko pull and tug and push to break free. "We should play nice, shouldn't we? Shouldn't sisters get along?"

Ryuko pulls harder on the chains, keeping her mind off of Nui Harime's disgusting words and disgusting voice and disgusting presence. She'll break the damn bed if it's the last thing she does. It may be fancy, but it's no match for *her.*

"Stop talkin' bullshit!" Ryuko eventually says, the chains shaking wildly. She tries to spit into Harime's smug face, but her efforts only get her a wad of saliva on the sheets. "Like *hell* you're any *sister* of mine!"

Ryuko doesn't stop tugging. Nui Harime smiles some more at Ryuko's response, opening her mouth to spout out what Ryuko can only assume to be more asinine garbage, but it is at that moment that Ryuko hears instead another voice.

"Oh, please don't mind her, darling," the voice says, silky smooth and full of so much condescension that whoever this bitch is could give *Satsuki Kiryuin* a run for her money.

Ryuko's thoughts are only furthered when the woman walks into the room. Each step is measured and calculated, her high heels *clacking* against the overly-bright tile, her entire presence seeming to light up the whole room even further.

Ryuko, frankly, didn't think *that* was even possible.

Everything about the woman before her is irritatingly on-point. Her lipstick is flawless, her hair styled so meticulously that Ryuko questions if this is even reality, and the woman's outfit looks *horrendously* familiar to the one *she's* been stuffed in, full of white and feathers and glistening, exuberant fabric.

" *You*," Ryuko sneers, never ceasing her task of breaking free of this damn bed. "I don't know who the hell you are, but-"

"Nui is just excited, dear," the woman continues, as though Ryuko had said nothing at all. She pauses in her place, smiling a threatening, purple-lipsticked smile Ryuko's way.

"It's not every day," the woman says, slowly, carefully, "that Nui meets someone as wondrous as *you* ."

Well, *that* makes Ryuko feel sick to her stomach.

But it doesn't matter who this skanky, gaudy-peacock bitch is or what's going on. Right now, all that matters is if he's okay.

He *has* to be, right? If she's survived, then surely-

The woman laughs. "You are so on edge," she says, her voice mockingly-sweet. "You really ought to relax. Would I *ever* hurt you, after missing you for all this time?"

Well, *that* makes Ryuko feel even sicker.

You had me chained to a fucking bed, she half-wants to say, but she knows that it doesn't matter right now.

"Where. Is. He," she repeats, pulling even more fiercely against her cuffs, her wrists aching from the pressure. "If you hurt him, I'll-"

"You'll *what*, dear?" asks the woman. Her high heels *clack* against the shining tiles as she steps closer and closer to where Ryuko sits, eventually settling on sitting right beside her, ignoring Ryuko's pushes and shoves, not even flinching.

It is only when the two meet eyes that Ryuko feels a deep terror inside. This woman looks at her like *food*, and her gaze is so devastating that for a moment, Ryuko cannot move, her body stuck in place as the woman runs a chilly, ice-cold hand over her cheek, cooing, "You *poor* thing-"

And Ryuko doesn't think. The woman's touch is so revolting, so repulsive, that Ryuko's entire body rejects it, seeming to scream. She plunges her teeth into the bitter, frozen skin as though by instinct, biting hard enough to draw blood.

The woman pulls her hand quickly away, her smile faltering. Ryuko spits onto the sheets, and then spits again, watching as stark red spreads across the endless expanse of white.

" *Where. Is. He,* " Ryuko says once more. Her voice is louder than it has been this entire time, echoing throughout the room, seeming so much stronger and menacing than she feels. She can't calm her heart, her breathing is too rapid, her body is on fire, and this *taste* in her mouth, it's-

"You poor, *poor* creature," says the woman now, the sugary, faux-kindness of only moments before lost, replaced by something far more sinister and heartless. "So *obsessed* with a *rag* that's not even worthy of *speaking* your name."

The woman holds out her wounded hand before Ryuko, her wide, cocky smile returning, and Ryuko watches, in horror, as the bite marks fade to nothingness, the streaks of scarlet vanishing.

"Your silly little dish cloth couldn't stop crying for you," Harime cuts in, coming so disgustingly close that Ryuko swears she can smell her putrid, rotten-egg-reeking breath. ""Ryuko, Ryuko, Ryuko!" It was *sooo* annoying! So, I just finally put it out of its misery! You understand, right?"

Ryuko's heart seems to stop. She can't feel her body anymore. The bright, white room seems, suddenly, darker than anything she's ever experienced.

But Nui Harime is not finished. "It got *so* mad when Lady Ragyo just wanted to see your pretty little heart! It tried to fight us, like it could really do anything! Hm, what would your stupid friend say about it?"

She pauses, only to laugh. "Right! She'd say that your Kamui was all chopped up like a salad! It couldn't do anything at all! It could only watch and cry like a baby!"

The woman-Ragyo, whatever her name is, Ryuko has no idea what is happening anymore-places her should-be-wounded hand over Ryuko's.

"People like *us*," she says, but Ryuko doesn't wait to hear the rest.

She doesn't know what is happening. She doesn't know where she is, or who this woman is, or even what had happened the night before.

But she knows he's gone. He's gone, and she couldn't save him.

He's *gone*, and it's all her fault.

The last thing Ryuko remembers, when she thinks back on that day, is the crashing, screeching sound of her chains breaking.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "AU: Ryuko with Senketsu in which they find out the truth about Ryuko's Life Fibers and family before episode 18."

Rose-Colored Hair - Satsunon

The Woman with the Rose-Colored Hair

In the grandest city in the world, there lives a girl with rose-colored hair who wishes for nothing more than the heart of the finest lady in the land.

When the girl is young, and her lyre not yet exchanged for a kithara, and her personality still not-even-remotely-reasonable, she sings openly of her love. To all who will listen-and especially to those who will not-the girl preaches endlessly of the great splendor and grandeur of the one whom she can only consider a goddess trapped in a human body.

"Surely," the girl declares, mostly to herself than to anybody at all, " *I* am the only one in all the cosmos deserving of such noble beauty!"

And had the girl been allowed, she would have played her lyre as the women dressed and dyed her hair, her tiny fingers dancing along the strings as she cried out the words of her own lyrical poetry, which-in her mind-is certainly greater than anything that Sappho woman could have come up with, because truly, unquestionably, Sappho could have never loved anyone as wondrous as her own love.

But the girl is not allowed to take her lyre any place she pleases, and any attempts garner her nothing but scoldings and admonishments, and so it is often that she has to keep herself satisfied with her voice alone.

And so the girl sings, and sings-all throughout the day and well into the night, at times-singing until her voice reaches exhaustion and carrying on even as her notes wobble and her throat aches.

Never, the girl swears, will anyone forget her love for the finest lady in the land.

And yet, as the girl with the rose-colored hair grows older, and her lyre is replaced with the grandest kithara money could ever buy, and her personality is perhaps almost-remotely-reasonable, her songs quiet.

If *she* is the only one worthy of the great noble beauty of her love, she thinks to herself, then why in the world should anyone *but* her love be worthy of hearing her songs? The simple people and the plebeians could never understand something so fine and majestic as her infatuation, and so the girl takes to keeping her songs to herself, playing her kithara in the quiet of her bedroom, her voice only whispering words of passion.

Still, the girl cannot help herself, one sunny afternoon, to hum as the women tie her hair into elaborate buns and braids. Her rambunctious spirit no longer leaves her anxious and squirming in her seat as she is waited on and adored, but she is still a bright burst of energy, and she is still full of love.

The sound of the girl's song brings a frown to one of the women's faces.

"It is a shame," the woman says, quietly, more to herself than to anyone at all, "that your lady will be going far away soon, on a long journey, and it is uncertain when she will return."

The girl with the rose-colored hair immediately ends her humming at the words. She stops tapping her foot at once, rising to her feet, her heart racing in her chest. Never does the girl's fiery, saffron yellow tunic seem brighter than it does in this moment, as she stands still in the sunlight, her hair half-done with intricate twists and half-adorned with sparkling golden pins.

She whips her head around to face the woman who had spoken.

"Where did you hear such a thing?" the girl demands, her voice louder and more threatening than she had meant it-though she does not regret her tone, either.

The woman stutters. All the others frown at her, their eyes narrowed. *How dare you*, their faces say, *speak to our lady so!*

But the girl with the rose-colored hair does not wait for an answer, and does not mind any of them at all. She rushes away without another thought, running as fast as her legs can take her through her *domus*, ignoring the women's cries that she cannot leave with her hair in such a state, fetching her orange sandals as she rushes past the *tablinum* and the *atrium* and the *vestibulum.*

The girl tries very hard not to think of her parents' scoldings, when she sees their eyes glued on her as she passes, and as she bursts out the *ostium.*

Never once slowing to a walk or stopping, the girl makes her way towards the city streets, sprinting even as her hair collapses and her golden hair pins fall to the ground with light *clinks* . Her sandals *flop* against the stone roads as she runs, the pattern of it all so rhythmic and exciting that it fills the girl with energy, and so she cannot help herself, her mind filling with songs at the noise-though she cannot say if they are songs she has written in the past or songs she *will* write in the future.

But it doesn't matter, she knows, because all that matters is that the girl cannot stop thinking of her love, and cannot stop thinking of her lady's dark hair and those rare, gentle smiles and how, someday, it *will* be hers, all hers, if only-

The girl enters her lady's *domus* through the *posticum*, where the lower people would, and all stare at this patrician rushing through as though she is mad, for the girl knows well that she is in complete disarray, her cheeks as rosy as the hair that has fallen apart around her. She gasps in air and sweat pours down her brow, but she gives

no mind to the disapproval that surrounds her, holding her head up high.

Surely, the girl thinks, they do not know how lucky they are to be serving *her* great lady, because she would give up her aristocracy in a moment if *she* could ever be so close to the one she loves.

The people say nothing to the girl with the rose-colored hair, and they do not try to stop her, either, simply pointing towards the *peristylium* when she demands, breathlessly, to know where her lady is.

And so the girl goes, running past the *posticum* and past the square pillars and past the landscape paintings adorning the portico walls, coming into the garden where her lady stands, as poised and elegant as always, no matter the fact that her dark hair is as undone as the girl's rose-colored hair, and no matter the fact that the girl knows, just from looking, that her lady has rushed away from the *laconicum* too quickly again, her long, flowing locks still damp from the bath and her skin still smelling strongly of the massage oils of the *tepidarium.*

The girl smiles her lady's way, in spite of the situation.

"You never can relax, can you?" she says, and she thinks she knows her lady's answer before she speaks, imagining a cool response of, *You know how I dislike the bath.*

But her lady does not speak on that, instead looking towards the girl with the rose-colored hair with her eyebrows raised in quiet amusement.

"So you heard, and you came," the lady says.

It takes everything within the girl to keep her emotions at bay, though her heart aches and begs to sing. "Of course I came, silly," she manages, and she takes her lady's soft hand into her own, ignoring

the gasps of all those who surround them, and she says, "Come with me, won't you? Just for a moment?"

Let me take care of you, the girl wishes to speak, and though she dares not, she thinks the words so strongly that she wonders if her lady understands their meaning perfectly even in silence.

For a moment, her lady is still, saying nothing, though she soon nods her head-much to the disapproval of all those around them.

"I will be off," she says, and she holds the girl's hand, walking away from her gardens and green shrubbery and flowers and fountains and sculptures and fish ponds, calmly striding towards the *vestibulum*, to the world outside her *domus* .

The girl cannot help but marvel at her lady's grace. Though her hair is undone and the girl never ought to have begged her to leave her *domus* in such a state, the blood-red of her lady's Tyrian purple tunic, and her bright crimson sandals, and, well, her entire, very presence say, loudly, that she is the finest lady in all the world.

And so the two walk, hand in the hand. Some surely look at the strange patrician with the frenzied, disheveled rose-colored hair with disapproval, but the girl pays them no mind, holding her chin up, and pushing closer to her lady. It is only when they are alone, in the city's gardens, that they speak their minds.

"I am coming with you, you know," the girl says, sitting beside her lady on a stone bench. It is spring, and the blossoms from the flowering trees fall around them. The girl carefully pulls away any from her lady's hair.

Her lady is quiet a moment, contemplating the girl's words. "You will be risking your life," she says.

"I don't care," the girl answers. She laughs. "There is nothing more worthy I could hope to do with it."

At that, her lady cracks one of her rare, gentle smiles, and though the girl knows it is surely beneath her to style her lady's hair, and knows that her untrained hands cannot do much-and especially not without a *calamistrum* to bring her lady's hair into fine curls-the girl finds her fingers in her lady's locks before long, and quietly, without a word, she twists the lady's hair into braids that will only be undone as soon as the lady return to her *domus*, all while the lady reveals everything she is planning, for the first time, to the girl's ears.

"Do you still wish to stay by my side?" her lady finishes.

The girl smiles a broad, toothy, mischievous smile. She pulls from her hair her finest hair clip-and the only one that had managed to stay with her as she ran-golden and shining in the dappled light that falls over them from beneath the trees, adorned with the sculpted bust of the fierce goddess Bellona in her military helmet.

The girl with the rose-colored hair places the pin at the crown of her lady's head.

That, she knows, should be answer enough.

It is not for a few years that the girl with the rose-colored hair returns to the lady's *domus*, and when she does, it is, oddly enough, at the lady's request.

So the girl comes to the lady's *domus* not through the *posticum*, but through the *ostium* as any proper guest should, and is surprised to find that it is the lady herself who greets her in the *atrium*, all by herself, looking in high spirits, and yet also-the girl thinks, almost frustratingly-as wild as her wild sister.

For the lady's hair is not curled from a *calamistrum* and not wrapped in buns and twists and braids, instead running freely down her back, swishing with her steps. The lady, too, does not wear the grand, Tyrian purple tunic as she had all those years ago, and does not wear her dazzling crimson sandals, either, instead adorned in a tunic

as brown as the earth as she walks along her empty, deserted *domus* with her feet left bare.

The lady has bright plans for her future, and she does not hold them inside as she had done, once, and does not whisper them quietly as the girl styles her dark hair. She speaks boldly, and resolutely, declaring that she *will* change the world, she swears it, and she will do anything in her power to protect and defend this beautiful, incomprehensible planet she calls home.

"I know you will," says the girl with the rose-colored hair, but any more words promptly leave her, when the two arrive in the lady's *peristylium.*

The once perfectly-manicured gardens, the girl notices at once, have become overgrown, shrubbery jutting into the pathways and branches hanging every which way, while the fountains no longer run at all, their basins empty and dusty and coated in a layer of decaying leaves and flower petals. All around them the grounds are unswept and unmanaged, bits of nature left in the crevices of the walkways and completely covering the stones.

And the girl understands, more than she ever has, that without her mother's influence, the lady has truly let everyone go.

They sit beneath the trees, and the lady takes the girl's hand into her own. "It is difficult to do this alone," she admits, staring deep into the girl's eyes, leaving the girl quite breathless indeed.

But she does not turn away. "Silly," she says. "You can do anything."

"I can," answers the lady, "but I do not *wish* to do it alone."

The girl looks up. Before her, the lady looks more beautiful than ever, she thinks, though she cannot understand it, for surely, when dressed in such a way, and with her hair let loose, the lady is as wild and unmanaged as the gardens have become.

"You have always been by my side," the lady continues. "I could not have gotten this far alone."

The girl manages a laugh. "I wouldn't *let* you get this far alone," she says, and she smiles one of her mischievous smiles, reaching her hands towards the lady's hair. As beautiful as it is now, she cannot help the urge to style it, as she once did.

"I won't let you do your hair alone, either," the girl finishes.

But this time, the lady does not let her. "You have always been by my side," she repeats. "Let me be by *your* side for once."

The lady smiles. "Let *me* take care of *you* ."

And so the lady takes the girl's rose-colored hair into her own hands, and twists it into braids and buns, and places the girl's own hair clip at the crown of her head, still golden and shining and adorned with the image of the goddess Bellona in her military helmet.

"I am not a goddess to be adored, like she is," the lady says, fumbling, rosy locks falling about the girl's shoulders and cheeks and over her forehead. "I am not worthy of worship-and I do not wish to be."

The lady sighs as the pin slips from the girl's head, falling to the stone bench with a gentle *click.* With unsure hands the lady retrieves it, cocking her head as she looks over the rosy strands spilling every which way.

The girl swallows hard at the words, as unsure as the lady's handiwork. "You *are* worthy of everything I have ever given you," she argues, but the lady shakes her head, her dark hair swaying with the motion.

"No," she says, and she smiles one of those sweet, rare, gentle smiles that never fail to make the girl's heart melt into a useless mess. "I am only human. We are *both* only human. Can't you see?"

No, the girl wants to say. I *can't* see, because surely, certainly, the lady is the kind of human that *she* could never, ever hope to measure up to. The lady is the type of *human* that she could only ever treasure and admire and wish to call hers.

The lady must see her disagreement on her face, for she pulls the girl's hand into her own, once more. "Let me put it this way," the lady says, and she uncurls her free hand to reveal the goddess Bellona in her palm. "A goddess high on a mountain cannot understand the suffering and heartache of silly mortals. Priceless gold cannot value you as you value it."

The lady gazes directly into the girl's eyes again, her own blue eyes mesmerizing, piercing. "A goddess cannot love you," she says. "Priceless gold cannot love you. But *I* love you, and I hope, one day, that I can call you mine, and you can call me yours, and we can be each other's and the world's and our own, because we will not be a goddess to a mortal, or a treasure to a queen, but foolish, silly humans in love."

And the girl is quite unsure of what to say, and so sits in silence a long, long moment, her heart thudding deep in her chest, and her cheeks surely far rosier than the hair piled up on the top of her head. She thinks of all her years of pining, and of all the songs stuffed deep inside, and of all her hours plucking the strings of her kithara, and thinks of her treasure, her goddess, her strength and noble beauty that would be hers and hers alone.

But the lady is smiling a bashful, crooked smile her way-a kind the girl is not quite sure she has *ever* seen-and she thinks, No, I have never longed for an object to keep locked away with a key, and never dreamed of riches to admire from afar, for she had only ever wished, however selfishly, to be the only one in the entire world whom the lady loves the most.

Yes, the girl-no, the *woman* -with the rose-colored hair thinks, she has only ever wished to be loved as she loves, and as that bashful,

crooked smile her way only grows, she is sure that her wish has been granted.

She's even surer, when trembling, laughing, *human* lips touch hers.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "Nonon x Satsuki, Roman Empire."

The Girl Can't Help It - Sats, Ryu, Mako

The Girl Can't Help It

If asked, Satsuki Kiryuin would deny, quite quickly, quite calmly, that she's keeping an eye on her little sister.

"Matoi is more than capable of taking care of herself," she would say to any such accusations, without even a moment's hesitation, and surely, certainly, she would believe her words. There is, she knows, little in the universe that could bring her baby sister down.

But maybe Satsuki can't help the knot of worry building deep inside her, even as the sun droops down low and Soroi's tea grows cold and Matoi shows no sign of strain. How *could* she help it, really, Satsuki justifies to herself, when it had only been mere hours since this girl before her had been drenched in her own blood and had ripped away *her* unbearable burden and Satsuki had to imagine scenario after scenario of all her efforts being for naught and her sister falling to the ground and suffering and screaming and choking out her last breath as she herself stood useless and powerless even after everything she'd fought for and everything she'd done and-

Okay, so maybe Satsuki looks Matoi's way just a bit. *Just a bit.* You can't blame her.

But Matoi, Satsuki sees, seems perfectly fine, even for all that had happened. The girl's smiles are wide, her laughter genuine. She plucks croquettes from her plate and eats with the kind of vigor that any growing teenager should have. No matter Satsuki's own mistakes and all she had done wrong, the sight before her tells her, wordlessly, that Matoi is happy.

The knot deep inside loosens. Now Satsuki can't help her own smiling, or the strange, bubbling warmth that builds and builds, and

bashfully, uncertainly, she lets the feelings stay. They're beautiful, she thinks. They're incomprehensible. They're not distractions. They're strength. If Matoi had taught her anything, it's that.

But no matter the happy picture before her, Satsuki still knows that it's not exactly a surprise when Matoi's big, eager grins fall into something more subdued, something tired, as though the day's events finally catch up to her and she finally feels the exhaustion of everything that had occurred. Matoi stretches her arms over her head, a plate half-filled with croquettes still in her lap, and says, with a yawn and a groan, "I'll be back in a bit."

Matoi stands, yawning still, and it seems for a moment that she's going to explain where she'll be wandering off to on this ship, but Mankanshoku doesn't let her, rushing to her own feet with a knowing grin.

"I got it, Ryuko!" she cries. "After being apart for so long, you need to spend some *alone time* with Senketsu!"

Even in the darkness that surrounds them, Satsuki doesn't miss the bright-red blush that comes over Matoi's cheeks. "Um…" Matoi says, awkwardly, a crooked smile on her face, "I think you're misunderstanding…"

Mankanshoku shakes her head, offering Matoi a wink as she piles croquettes from her own plate onto Matoi's. "Take these, though!" Mankanshoku says. "You need to build up your strength! Huah, huah!" Mankanshoku punches the air, scowling, as though attacking an invisible enemy. "Got it?!"

Matoi softens. She looks down to the croquettes Mankanshoku had given her, smiling a timid smile, and then she says, quietly, instinctively, automatically, "Thanks, Sis."

And Satsuki can't help it. She stiffens at the word, her grip on her own plate of croquettes tightening just as much as the knot deep inside does. She turns her eyes away, but she's not fast enough,

catching a bashful, embarrassed look come across Matoi's face before she lets her attention fall completely to the half-dozen croquettes still littering her own plate.

"So, uh, see ya," Matoi says. She walks away, and Satsuki sighs. The croquettes that once seemed so delicious now seem to taunt her, and she can't say that she feels all that hungry anymore, either.

But Mankanshoku won't let her drown in self-pity. The girl plops down next to Satsuki quicker than Satsuki would have even thought possible, piling croquettes off her plate and onto Satsuki's now.

"You know," Mankanshoku says, without giving Satsuki the time to react or respond, "the best part about eating croquettes is eating them with family!"

As though to demonstrate, Mankanshoku takes one of the many croquettes she somehow still has left and stuffs it in her mouth, *mmm* -ing and *ahh* -ing as she chews.

"See!" Mankanshoku says, her mouth still half-full. "These croquettes wouldn't be *nearly* as good if I were alone!"

Satsuki manages to smile again, just a little. "I'm sure you and Matoi have shared many good memories together, eating croquettes," she says. She ignores how the knot inside tightens at her own words.

Mankanshoku doesn't make any note of Satsuki's discomfort, either. She stuffs three croquettes into her mouth at once, nodding her head as she chews and swallows, looking quite deep in thought, and with nothing more to say herself, Satsuki takes to poking at her own croquettes with her chopsticks, watching blankly as the greasy meat balls roll and flip over.

Like a child! Satsuki thinks, and she curses her ridiculous feelings. She doesn't have time to waste moping like this, and yet-

"Mm-hmm!" Mankanshoku bursts out. She jumps to her feet once more, and Satsuki wonders for a moment if all the croquettes she has piled high will fall to the ship's deck.

But they don't, simply shuddering with Mankanshoku's quick steps, and the girl holds a hand out to Satsuki, smiling wide.

"Won't you come walk with me for a bit, Lady Satsuki?" she asks.

Satsuki takes a look around. Jakuzure looks to be arguing with Mankanshoku's younger brother, Mrs. Mankanshoku can't stop piling croquettes onto Gamagoori's plate, Sanageyama seems preoccupied in egging them on, Soroi is fixing more tea…

"All right," says Satsuki, sure that she is unneeded here for the moment. She stands herself, still holding her plate full of croquettes that she's hardly convinced she'll be able to eat. Mankanshoku beams.

The two walk along the ship, taking care to note the rhythm of the sea. Where they're going Satsuki hasn't the slightest clue, but the destination seems of little importance to Mankanshoku, and Satsuki can't say she minds the distraction. Mankanshoku skips along and eats croquettes as they go, talking with her mouth full the whole way.

"You know, Lady Satsuki," she says, as the stars begin to glimmer in the sky, and after relaying quite the incomprehensible tale about her favorite pajamas, "the first time Ryuko ate croquettes, Mom thought there was something terribly, horribly wrong with them! Ryuko just started bawling at the table after she put them in her mouth! Like they were *poison* !"

Mankanshoku swallows, only to stuff another croquette into her mouth. "But there wasn't a problem at all!" she goes on. "Ryuko just thought they were so good that she couldn't help but tear up and cry!"

Mankanshoku swallows again, just as loudly and unseemly as she had been doing all evening. Satsuki manages another smile, sort of. "Is-is that so?" she asks.

"Yup!" says Mankanshoku. "Ryuko was so itty bitty that I don't know if she remembers it, but *I* do!"

Mankanshoku has sped up, and so Satsuki quickens her own steps as well. "I see," Satsuki says, unsure, because there's a part of her, deep inside, that can't help but wonder why in the world she's devoting so much time and energy to such meaningless, frivolous concerns, and why it is she walks alongside Mankanshoku at all, and why she would ever think she has the time for any of this when the fate of the world is still in her hands, as it always has been.

But the greater part of her is twisting the knot tighter and tighter inside, and that greater part is saying, loudly, that today, tonight, there is nothing more *meaningful* than hearing of her little sister's life without her.

The knot only tightens further at the thought.

"All right!" cries Mankanshoku. She stops quite suddenly, popping the last of her croquettes into her mouth. Satsuki very nearly knocks into her, but manages to still herself right before her own plate of croquettes topples onto the sleeve of Mako's sailor uniform.

If Mankanshoku notices the near-collision, she certainly doesn't seem to mind. She turns to face Satsuki straight on, her eyes alight with excitement. "Anyway, Lady Satsuki," she says, so bubbly that it seems she's holding back laughter, "sisters should share croquettes together, don't you think?"

Unfortunately for Satsuki, she is not allowed the time to respond. Mankanshoku places her hands on Satsuki's back and gives her a great push forward that surprises even *Satsuki*, and Satsuki quickly finds herself stumbling towards the sea, a few croquettes tumbling off her plate and onto the deck with gentle *thuds* that are *just* loud

enough to draw the attention of the girl who sits right before her, at the edge of the Sol, her legs dangling down towards the water, an empty plate of croquettes beside her.

Satsuki swallows hard as she realizes that Mankanshoku had deliberately led her *right* to where Matoi went. She feels her face burn red as Matoi stares her way.

"I," Satsuki starts, in a manner that is *most* undignified. "I was simply wondering if I might join the two of you."

Satsuki holds up her plate. "I brought you some more croquettes," she adds, as though *they* were truly the reason she stands there. Satsuki sighs in frustration when she steals a look behind her and notices that any last trace of Mankanshoku is long gone.

Matoi frowns, looking down-to Senketsu, surely, Satsuki knows-before nodding her head. "Sure," she says, and her own face burns a bit pink as she stutters, adding, "S-S-Si-Satsuki."

Somehow, Satsuki manages to smile at that, as she sits beside her sister on the deck, her own legs hanging down towards the water. The knot inside twists and twists tighter.

"It's okay," she says, though she knows that with the way she says it, it certainly doesn't *sound* okay at all. "You don't have to force a sisterly bond with me, not for my sake." Her smile only widens. Her gaze falls to the sea.

"After all," she says. "You already have an older sister."

Satsuki can't say she knew what she expected in response to such a statement, but it certainly wasn't a laugh and a shake of Matoi's head. But that's exactly what Matoi does, and to Satsuki, it could almost be a month ago again, in the burnt remains of Osaka, their weapons pressed up against each other's throats.

"Hmph," Matoi says after a moment, sounding disgusted, disappointed. "Still acting so high and mighty, even with your own little sister?" She pauses a moment, looking to Satsuki's croquettes, and then right into her eyes. "Who says I'm doing any of this for *you* ?"

Satsuki does not know what to say to that, and so Matoi continues, "How much of my story do you know, huh, Satsuki Kiryuin? Did that computer-geek Inumuta give ya all the dirt on my life, huh? Did you look into every last, little detail you could about me so you could better use me as your precious little asset? As your *weapon* ?"

"Ryuko…" Satsuki thinks she hears in response to Matoi's words, but the voice is fuzzy and hard to make out, and she figures it must just be her imagination, or tiredness.

She shakes her head, looking towards her sister-

"I don't want to hear it, Senketsu!" Matoi snaps. "This is between me 'n Satsuki."

Matoi returns Satsuki's gaze. "So?" she asks.

Satsuki sighs, long and deep. "I didn't know much, Matoi," she says, truthfully.

"Well," says Matoi, "did ya know that my dad dumped me 'n Senketsu off at Mako's house when I was five, huh? Did you know that he said it'd just be a little while, and that he'd be back for me in a week? Did ya know that he *never* came back, even though he damn well could have, but his fucking *research* always mattered to him more than me, and I never heard from that shit sack again until the day he fucking died?"

Matoi turns away. Satsuki feels her mouth go very dry. "No," Satsuki says. "I didn't know any of that, Matoi."

But Matoi is not finished. She speaks louder now, her words coming faster and faster. "Did ya have any idea," she asks now, "what it felt like, to grow up in a place you knew you didn't belong? Did ya ever think about what fucking *hell* it was to hear your mom and dad arguin' about what to do with you, while you kept tryin' and tryin' to find your *real* dad and kept comin' up with jack shit?"

Satsuki is quiet, and for a moment, Ryuko is, too.

Then, much more restrained than before, she says, "It was never a walk in the freaking park, Kiryuin. I knew that Mako's family wasn't *mine.* I knew she wasn't *really* my sister. I knew I had no right to call her Sis."

A bitter smile comes over Ryuko's face. "But the lot of them… they always tried so hard to make me feel like I belonged. Like I really could be part of a *normal* family like that, even though I knew damn well that my *real* family was fucked up." She shakes her head, drawing her arms around herself.

"And now…" Ryuko says, "well, it's even more- *I'm* even more-fucked up than I coulda ever guessed."

Ryuko looks Satsuki right in the eyes once more, her gaze just as piercing and passionate as it was the day they first met.

"So *fuck you*, Satsuki Kiryuin!" Ryuko says-shouts, screams. " *Fuck you* if you think *I* don't care about *finally* having someone else who understands where the *fuck* I'm comin' from."

Silence falls between them, the air thick with the intensity of Ryuko's words.

"Who's just as fucked up as you, isn't that right?" Satsuki manages to say, quietly, after a moment.

Ryuko laughs, turning away from her sister. "I s'pose so. Two fucked-up-as-shit sisters, right here."

"I didn't know you felt this way, Ryuko," Satsuki says.

Ryuko flashes a cocky grin. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

"You're right," says Satsuki, and she pushes her plate of croquettes closer to her sister. "But I hope you'll let me learn more."

And right before Satsuki, Ryuko's cocky smile shifts into something almost soft, her eyes wide with what Satsuki can only think of as hope.

Ryuko pokes her own chopsticks into the offered croquettes.

"Of course," she says, taking a bite.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "Satsuki and Ryuko fic (sisters bond) in show, except that in this au Ryuko was adopted by the Mankanshokus when she was a child."

comfortable - Ryuko, Sen, Satsuki, Mako

comfortable

It all begins on July 7th, with a romantic space adventure.

The movie was Senketsu's idea, 'cause somehow-and it wasn't any fault of *hers* -Ryuko's ridiculous uniform got it in his ridiculous head to find the trailers *intriguing.*

Like, intriguing-enough-to-warrant-a-trip-to-the-theater intriguing.

And Senketsu didn't just want to go as a joke, either. He was stone-cold, dead serious. Some sappy, insufferable love story between an alien and a human that those damn promos and TV spots couldn't stop overhyping got him all starry-eyed in a way that Ryuko thought only a good ironing could do, and he was completely unapologetic about his excitement, eagerly gushing on and on and *on.*

And, well, Ryuko wasn't gonna rain on Senketsu's parade (he just hasn't seen enough movies to know any better, she told herself), but if she were being honest, she was absolutely, utterly convinced that no one else in the entire *world* wanted to see the corny mess. Even *Mako* of all people passed up on it.

But beyond Ryuko's most out-there, nonsensical, wildest expectations, *Satsuki* agreed.

Satsuki Kiryuin.

"I think it looks quite sweet," Satsuki said, when Senketsu inquired about the cheese-fest while out on one of their shopping extravaganzas. She smiled his way-that-too-nice-for-Satsuki kinda expression that Ryuko's still getting used to-not even hesitating as she declared, in no uncertain terms, "I would love to go with you, Senketsu."

Ryuko right choked on her ice cream at that.

Senketsu couldn't have been happier.

(But he tried very hard not to let it on, the obnoxious outfit.)

Still, even if the thought of her own flesh-and-blood sister having such terrible taste made Ryuko die on the inside a little bit, she put it on herself to see the best of the situation. She was stuck going to the theater with Senketsu no matter what-God knows (if there is a God, of course) that Ryuko would endure ten trillion times worse than a shitty movie to see Senketsu happy-but at least with Satsuki tagging along, Ryuko would have someone else to keep her company, too.

There would be no way that Ryuko's very own big sis could think such a ridiculous, gooey, feel-good sap trap was any good at all once they were actually there in the theater.

No way in hell.

On the sunny, balmy afternoon of July 7th, Ryuko is wrong.

Very, very, *very* wrong.

Well, actually, Ryuko tells herself, as the three of them exit the dark theater, the movie was just as bad as she had expected. (Maybe even *worse*, if she were telling the truth.)

But she certainly, definitely didn't expect the absolutely nauseating *gushing* that Senketsu and Satsuki got up into as soon as the credits rolled.

Heck, how they even kept paying *attention* past the first fifteen minutes is well beyond *her* understanding, but as soon as Ryuko comes face-to-face with the overly-bright, too-hot reality of summer in Japan, she can't try to deny the sickening, horrible truth a second longer.

Satsuki and Senketsu didn't just *like* the movie.

They *loved* it.

And they'd spent the last who-the-hell-knows-how-long spouting out nothing but praises and overeager blubbering, and they're *not stopping* . They're standing out in broad daylight and walking down the sidewalk talking their mouths off about the most embarrassing movie to hit the theaters in ten million years.

Ryuko half-considers tossing the last remnants of her Calpis over herself just to get them to yap about something else.

But she doesn't.

And on they go.

On and on and *on* .

"If I saw it again," Senketsu says, after spilling out a whole stream of *I know, I know!s,* "I still wouldn't be able to keep myself from crying when the pair parted in Australia!"

He blinks movie-theater darkness from his eyes, staring up at Satsuki, who nods her head. "I didn't cry, but I got awfully close," she admits. "The scene was ruined a little by the night sky. There would be no way you could see those constellations at that time of year in Australia."

Senketsu just about leaps right off of Ryuko's chest at that. "I was thinking the same!" he cries. He's as bubbling with excitement as he would be after the best damn ironing in the world, and he pushes Ryuko to walk a bit more quickly so that they can keep up with Satsuki's always-too-fast pace.

Ryuko only begrudgingly follows his lead, sipping those final bits of Calpis from her cup as obnoxiously as she can.

Neither Senketsu nor Satsuki make any note of it.

"The inaccuracy wasn't enough to pull me out of the moment," Senketsu goes on, now right beside Satsuki, "but it *was* a bit glaring."

Satsuki nods some more in agreement, and if Ryuko weren't so fed up over a silly movie, she might have found something amusing or funny or nice about how thoughtful Satsuki is over a thing she enjoyed.

Maybe even something *sweet* .

But now Ryuko's just tired and it's not so amusing or funny or nice or *comfortable* to be ignored by your clothes and your sister, and she only feels her irritation build inside her as Satsuki continues, "You would think the filmmakers would do more research for such a big-budget film!"

Satsuki shakes her head, frowning a bit, clutching her bag a bit tighter. "And there is also no way that robot could have moved so easily in the sand," she adds. "It was shaped like a soccer ball."

"And practically all of Earth's satellites orbit the planet west to east, not east to west!" Senketsu and Satsuki say together.

They both break out laughing.

Ryuko throws away her empty cup into the nearest trash bin with a grimace.

"I had no idea you were so interested in astrophysics and astronomy, Senketsu," Satsuki says. She's now smiling a very strange smile that makes Ryuko just a *bit* uncomfortable.

Senketsu blushes-at least, Ryuko *thinks* that's what he does, since she suddenly feels a lot warmer (and she was already hot enough to begin with in this 500-degree weather).

"Well, y-you know," Senketsu tells Satsuki, "Ryuko and I have both been to space. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since."

And Satsuki just won't quit it with that smile. Ryuko swears it's only getting worse. *Weirder.*

"You should take a look at some of the books in the Kiryuin library," Satsuki says. There's that overeagerness to her tone that's *almost* as uncomfortable as the ever-increasingly-uncomfortable look on her face, and she smiles a bit wider, adding, quickly, excitedly, "I think you would particularly like-"

And Ryuko can't help herself. She groans.

"Jesus," she whines. "If you wanna yap about this stuff so much, I don't think *I* should be the one wearing Senketsu!"

And they all stop walking. Right there. Just like that.

An awkward silence falls over the three of them, and in retrospect, maybe Ryuko would admit that she *maybe* sounded a *bit* too fed up and pissed off.

But at the time, Ryuko feels more than justified in her outburst. Being dragged along in a conversation by your damn clothes isn't exactly what she would call a good time.

Or *comfortable.*

But Senketsu hardly seems to mind the abrasiveness of Ryuko's words. He just brings his full attention to her, his eyes wide.

"Would it really be okay?" he asks. "For Satsuki to wear me?"

And Ryuko can't really find the words to answer right away. Senketsu can no doubt feel her heart fluttering, and she's come to feel very, very, *very* hot-like, *way* more than the this-is-summer kind of hot.

But Ryuko eventually takes a deep breath, *tryin'* to think a bit before she speaks. "Kamui Senketsu," she says, using the most chastising mom-voice she can muster (even though she's well aware that she is not convincing in the slightest), "I thought you finally got it through your head that you ain't just some outfit."

She pauses, on fire, and then gently, quietly, she adds, "You got a will all your own, Senketsu. You're your own person."

They're still stopped in place. Senketsu can't stop staring up at Ryuko, and Satsuki is staring, too.

Ryuko bites down on her lip, turning away. "And grown people don't go around asking other grown people for permission to be with a grown person who ain't them," she continues, hastily, face flushing. "Well, at least, they shouldn't! So you shouldn't be askin' *me* any of this."

Nobody says anything. They stay standing obtrusively on the sidewalk, and Ryuko can't help but feel even more embarrassed when she sees that Satsuki's awkward, uncomfortable smile has shifted into something you'd see plastered on the face of some proud mom at her kid's violin concert.

But Ryuko doesn't get too long to fuss over that as Senketsu sighs against her, which she takes immediately as Senketsu-language that he's gonna disagree with her, or something.

And he promptly does nothing of the sort.

"You're right, Ryuko!" Senketsu declares. "I should be asking Satsuki if it's all right!"

So Senketsu looks to Satsuki Kiryuin and the big weird smile that she's now directing his way (that's continuing to make Ryuko feel even *more* uncomfortable), and he asks, very nervously, "What do you say, Satsuki? Would you… wear me?"

Satsuki's smile only grows. "I would be honored, Senketsu," she says. "It has been too long. And I-"

Satsuki stops abruptly, meeting Ryuko's eyes, her icky, uncomfortable smile falling into what Ryuko could only describe as shame.

"And I would love to wear you again," Satsuki finishes, weakly.

And, well, now Ryuko's mild (yes, *mild*) discomfort and annoyance has twisted into the desire to just throw up all the popcorn and Calpis she'd spent the last two hours focusing on rather than the kill-me-now kitsch that was the ridiculous movie she'd overpaid for (even if it *was* Ladies' Day, she still always bought a ticket for Senketsu (and the hot mess wasn't worth even a single yen, if you had to ask *her* opinion)).

It wasn't like Satsuki was *trying* to be a bitch or anything-at least, Ryuko *hopes* so, anyway. But the reminder of *that time* just turns and turns Ryuko's stomach.

She doesn't let it on.

"Let's get on with it, then!" she says. "Let's go change *right fuckin' now."*

"Now?" Satsuki repeats.

"This minute?" Senketsu tries to clarify.

"Right now this minute," Ryuko insists.

And, okay, maybe she sounds just a *little* done with them.

But Senketsu and Satsuki agree, however reluctantly.

The three decide to grab lunch at a nearby convenience store, but before they do any of that, they head into the restrooms to change.

Ryuko, for one, is *quite* glad that no one else is in the facilities when they step inside. Quiet and emptiness meet them in the bathroom (as well as a space that Ryuko has to admit is much cleaner than she would expect from a convenience store).

Ryuko sighs as she enters a stall with Senketsu. Without a word, Satsuki goes into the one right beside her, the door closing with a *click.*

And Ryuko sighs once more, surrounded by mustard-yellow walls and a gleaming toilet. Though she would never say it out loud-and though she knows she hasn't even been with Senketsu a year yet-life without him by her side still feels like a gross, distant past, and the thought of walking out of here by herself is… strange.

Uncomfortable.

Ryuko would never say it makes her *nervous*, though. Never *nervous.*

Her heart must say otherwise.

"Ryuko…" Senketsu starts, looking up at her with big, concerned eyes.

But Ryuko turns away, pulling him off as aggressively and suddenly as she had the day his memory returned.

She talks fast. "Senketsu," she groans, "y'know better than to get all chatty in the bathroom. People'll think we're doing weird shit in here."

Senketsu falls to the bathroom floor, leaning up against the wall. "But there's no one else in here, Ryuko…" he says.

"Whatever!" Ryuko says right back.

She flings open the door and shoos Senketsu out like a little lost child. "Sis," she says, much more loudly than necessary, "open your door up so Senketsu can get over there."

Ryuko awkwardly reaches one arm out of her stall, using the other to hold the door close to her (as though to cover herself from anyone who might happen to wander in, but why the hell she gives a shit about *modesty* anymore is beyond her).

"Also I'm holding my hand out for your clothes," Ryuko adds. "So, like, just, uh, give 'em to me, or somethin'."

"Very well," Satsuki answers, and very uncomfortably, very ungracefully, she successfully passes her clothes into Ryuko's hands. (Of course, Satsuki's prissy ensemble almost falls to the ground what feels like half a dozen times and Ryuko has to stretch her arm out the farthest it'll go to get to them and there's a bit of swearing involved, but somehow, they manage.)

And armed with a new outfit, Ryuko retreats back into her stall and locks the door with a frown. Maybe they *shouldn't* have done this *right now this minute* after all. The thought of wearing her sister's clothes has never seemed so unpleasant- *uncomfortable* -until she has them in her hands.

"Sats, you dress like such a mom," Ryuko whines, pulling an ankle-length wrap skirt over herself. Rayon has never felt stranger to her after wearing little but Life Fiber and cotton pajamas for so long.

"And who the hell wears *sweaters* in the middle of summer?" Ryuko's barely pulled the cream-colored knit over herself and already she feels hotter than hell.

But Satsuki isn't paying the slightest bit of attention to Ryuko's complaints.

"Senketsu, you *are* lovely," she says to Senketsu instead. "But I do think I'm a little old for sailor uniforms-don't you think you are too, Ryuko?"

Ryuko's frown deepens.

"I suppose you *are* still in high school…" Satsuki muses.

Ryuko ties the slick white ribbon on the indigo skirt that now covers her into a sloppy bow. "Yeah, I *am*," she grinds out. "So, what?"

Ryuko *so* doesn't need this kind of patronizing bullshit right now. She fiddles with her sister's clothes, trying-and failing-to look somewhat presentable. It's more than obvious that nothing fits her quite right, and the sweater is the worst offender, hanging off her body loosely and awkwardly, the threads bunching up in a manner that's *way* uncomfortable.

Deep inside, a part of Ryuko never even wants to leave this stall.

But she'd never let any of those feelings on.

"Do you not wanna wear Senketsu anymore, huh?" Ryuko finds herself asking. A familiar anger bubbles up inside-the kind that'd bring her to strip down to her underwear and take on a gun-toting, even-more-naked guy with just her fists. "I swear, Satsuki. I don't care if you're my sister. If you make Senketsu cry, I'll-"

"And why would I ever do a thing like that?" Satsuki asks.

"I am not so prone to fits of crying!" Senketsu adds. He sounds so damn defensive that Ryuko doesn't have to be anywhere near him to know that he's got that hurt, put-upon look on his face.

Ryuko crosses her arms, leaning up against the mustard-yellow wall. "Hmph, *excuuuse me* for caring," she says, feeling damn hot in the face, but Senketsu and Satsuki pay her no mind.

"You are an incredible person, Senketsu," Satsuki is saying. "And I have been thinking. You are certainly more than a mere sailor uniform, so I *know* you are capable of looking like more, too."

Senketsu stutters. "I-I…" he says, and though Ryuko can't see, she imagines Satsuki giving him one of her uncomfortable, *weird* -o

smiles.

"If we do something like Life Fiber synchronization," Satsuki goes on, "then I *know* you can become whatever you like. Whatever suits *you* ."

"I've never done that before," Senketsu says. His voice trembles in a way that Ryuko has hardly *ever* heard coming from him, and for some reason, it all makes Ryuko feel like she's melting even more in this unseasonal sweater.

But she'd never say anything.

"I know you can do it," Satsuki tells Senketsu. "Let's try!"

"All right, Satsuki!" Senketsu says.

And before Ryuko knows it, together, as one, Senketsu and Satsuki shout out, "Life Fiber Synchronize!," their words seeming to echo across the empty, desolate space around them.

And Ryuko sinks down to the bathroom floor (that probably isn't quite as clean as she thought it was coming in) at the sound, letting her head fall against wall, wishing more than anything to tear this suffocating sweater off.

But she doesn't.

And they laugh. Senketsu and Satsuki laugh more intensely than Ryuko even thought *possible* for the two of them.

"You look great!" Satsuki cries, when the laughter falls away. "This is *exactly* something I would put in my closet. How did you know?"

Senketsu can't keep the excitement out of his voice. "I just gave it my best!" he says. "I saw what you gave Ryuko, and I thought, "If any ordinary clothes can look like that, then why can't I?""

The stall beside Ryuko opens with a *creak*, and Ryuko hears hersister rush out with Senketsu, calling her name with that overeagerness that just serves to make Ryuko feel even surer that she'd *love* to never leave this stall.

But Satsuki insists. "You *must* see this," she says. "Senketsu has done a fantastic job."

" *We* did a fantastic job, Satsuki," Senketsu butts in. "Remember, you are the one wearing me."

So with a groan and a grumble, Ryuko rises to her feet, brushing down on Satsuki's skirt and sweater and slowly, embarrassingly opening the stall door to reveal a sight that boggles the mind *almost* as much as the fact that human evolution was literally a thing just because of clothes aliens that wanted to eat them all.

Because *her* Senketsu… no longer looks like her Senketsu at all.

The outfit her sister wears before her is entirely foreign. Gone are the midriff-baring top, the suspenders, and mini skirt, replaced with a frilly, baby-blue button-up and a cozy-looking circle skirt in gray.

Ryuko wouldn't even believe that the sight before her was her Senketsu at all, had she not looked towards the elaborate, floral pattern embellishing Satsuki's collar and noticed, without a doubt, Senketsu's warm eyes staring back at her.

She swallows very hard, feeling her face turn very, *very* red.

Satsuki smiles Ryuko's way. "You ought to try this yourself sometime," she says.

But Ryuko can only nod, dully, as Senketsu and Satsuki skitter to the bathroom mirrors and laugh and spin in front of the glass, complimenting each other and gushing about their teamwork.

In her head, Ryuko would admit that, well, okay, sure, *maybe* it isa bit jarring to hear Senketsu's voice coming from somewhere other than her.

But she would never, ever admit that what leaves her firmly Not Hungry is the strange smile on her sister's face and how Senketsu and Satsuki just *can't shut up.* They'd gone right back to talking about that damn movie again, blathering on and on about this and that and *how romantic!*

Ryuko could hurl.

Somehow, though, Ryuko manages to at least nibble on her *yakisoba-pan.*

Then again, never in her life has convenience-store *yakisoba* stuffed in a hot dog bun tasted as bad as it does right now, as she sits next to Satsuki and Senketsu in the park and they act like some half-baked love story is worth more than a one-word review that just says, "Sucks."

'Course, Ryuko thinks, spending so long chewing the ends of a noodle that it quickly just tastes like mushy nothingness, Senketsu would tell her-all smugly and condescendingly-that it's better to not eat much of this stuff. Junk food, he'd say. How can you expect to keep up your strength with that?

Least, he *would* say all that crap, if *she* were the one wearing him.

Ryuko sighs. It's still summer and hot and sticky (and she's still stuck with Satsuki's sweater), but even she could admit that it's a fine enough day. The sky is a rich, deep blue, the way the sun filters through the leaves is so picturesque that if Mako had come along she'd beg to take about a hundred photos, and sitting here in the shade surrounded by all this niceness-with a cool breeze fluttering by that should keep her from getting *too* overheated-would normally be *great.* Any other day, any other time, Ryuko would *love* to be

where she is, eating cheap-o convenience store food with Senketsu and Satsuki beneath the trees.

But now, well. Now she's never felt sicker. The *yakisoba-pan* seems to taunt her with its smell and pitiful, this-stuff-was-made-really-fast appearance, and it's only when a bit of *yakisoba* slips from its bun and falls to the ground with a heavy *splat* that Senketsu and Satsuki take any note of Ryuko at all.

Senketsu looks her up and down at the noise (abruptly cutting off some conversation about space and time and love and who-knows-what).

"Ryuko," he says, his voice filled with the kind of concern that makes Ryuko feel even more ready to just vomit all over the place, "are you all right? You've barely touched your food."

More *yakisoba* drips from the bun to the ground, and Ryuko watches it fall, making absolutely no attempt to get it to stop. The cicadas are screaming and flies make their way to the dropped food, and, quietly, Ryuko stands herself up.

"It's shit," she says. Her voice is surprisingly calm for how much she wants to scream along with the cicadas, and as she makes her way to the nearest garbage can, she wonders when in the world she got this kind of self-control.

Ryuko stops before the bin. "I don't want this crap," she goes on, and without any feeling at all, she watches as the *yakisoba-pan* falls apart in the trash, the *yakisoba* spilling every which way, breaking away from the bun.

Ryuko takes her place back on the bench beside Satsuki and Senketsu. Satsuki frowns. Ryuko ignores it.

"I thought you'd *like* that I'm not eating that stuff," she says. Ryuko meant to direct the words at Senketsu, but, well, actually, it probably applies to the both of 'em.

Satsuki *really* didn't like hearing about all the Cup Curry Rice and instant *miso* soup she ate before she lived with the Mankanshokus, after all…

And now, Satsuki just frowns harder-and it's harder for Ryuko to ignore it-her caterpillar eyebrows furrowed in Concern. "Ryuko," she starts, "are you-"

"I just wanna head home," Ryuko blurts out. She supposes it's true, but that doesn't stop the blush creeping over her cheeks. "I-I mean," she stutters, "it's just been a long day, and I'm, uh, like really tired, and, uh…"

Satsuki stands with a graceful flourish and swish of Senketsu's now long, gray skirt. "I see," she says. "I suppose it is getting a bit late. I'd best return Senketsu to you, shouldn't I?"

Satsuki's sweater might as well be eating Ryuko alive. "Jesus," she grumbles, looking away. "Senketsu ain't fuckin' *mine.* I don't own 'im. It's Senketsu's choice to do whatever he wants."

Ryuko lets her eyes meet his, for just a moment. "Right, Senketsu?"

Satsuki's blue top looks very suddenly a bit pink. Ryuko tries very hard to smile, though she's not really looking at Satsuki and Senketsu anymore, and her effort probably just comes out seeming kinda fucked up and demonic.

"Look," Ryuko says, standing up again herself, cracking her back as though she's *toootally* cool with this whole situation (which she is, of course, definitely, absolutely, why *wouldn't* she be?). "You two're havin' so much fun, so why don't you stay with Satsuki for a change, Senketsu?"

The words fall out before Ryuko can even stop herself, and both Senketsu and Satsuki stare at her wide-eyed.

Well, Ryuko would be happy to join her fallen *yakisoba* and the screaming cicadas right about now.

But she can't stop it with the incessant, worthless blubbering. "Y-Y'know," she says, trying very hard-and failing even harder-to hide the twitter in her voice, "I was *just* thinking about how nice it'd be to spend some time away from obnoxious outfits!"

Satsuki and Senketsu exchange worried glances.

"Are you *sure* you'll be okay?" Senketsu asks.

"I don't need ya babysitting me!" Ryuko says-well, *shouts*, more like, which just serves to make Satsuki's frown become even *more* intense .

Ryuko sighs, and more quietly, more calmly, she adds, "'Sides, you should be askin' *Satsuki* if it's all right, not me."

So up Senketsu's eyes go, to his wearer. "Would you mind if I stayed the night with you?" he asks.

"Not at all," answers Satsuki. "But-"

Ryuko claps her hands together. "Well, I am just *so glad* we got that figured out!" she says. Her attention falls to the baggy, ill-fitting ensemble dripping off her body. "I'll return these mom-clothes to ya when we meet up again."

Satsuki doesn't even react to Ryuko's insults. She says, "Are you *sure* -"

But Ryuko storms away without waiting to hear the rest, waving a hand behind her.

"You guys just have fun," she says, even as she hears Senketsu call her name and Satsuki mutter something or other that she can't especially make out.

And, okay, sure. The walk back from downtown *has* never seemed so long.

Fine. Ryuko would admit *that* much.

Slouching and dragging her feet along the sidewalk, Ryuko keeps herself distracted by kicking along pebbles and listening for the *click, click, clicks* as they hop across the pavement. Whenever she loses a pebble to the grass or the streets, she picks out another on her path to hit along instead. Ryuko never seems to hold on to a stone for more than fifteen sidewalk squares, and maybe another time that'd annoy her, but she's got more than enough eating at her now.

It's not that she's *jealous*, of course, Ryuko thinks. Satsuki just doesn't know how to wash Senketsu right and ain't got a clue about how he likes to be ironed and maybe Satsuki would hurt herself wearing Senketsu for so long in that weird state because Senketsu was designed for *her* after all and she's just *concerned*, okay?

Ryuko loses another pebble on her walk. This one can't even have lasted five sidewalk squares, and she pauses on her way, groaning, trying to find another.

But it seems this sidewalk is fresh out of pebbles, and Ryuko ain't got anything even *close* to the patience or energy or care to go pick out the one she lost to the grass.

So she'll just *deal* with it, she thinks. If Senketsu and Satsuki come cryin' back to her in the morning, then she could at least say that they'd tried.

Ryuko almost-smiles at the thought. Things are gonna be okay. It's not like Senketsu is gonna…

Well, Ryuko doesn't get the chance to ponder anymore on that. Seemingly out of nowhere, she's attacked with a loud, energetic, over-peppy shout from none other than Mako Mankanshoku.

"Lady Satsuki!" the girl cries. She promptly throws down the yellow sponge she'd been using to clean the family car and rushes to where Ryuko stands, her arms outstretched for a hug.

"I didn't know you'd be coming to visit!" Mako goes on, but her smile quickly falls as she gets a better look at the very *not* -Satsuki Kiryuin with the too-big, uncomfortable clothes and ordinary eyebrows and wild hair that will never sit flat, no matter how hard you might try.

"Oh, it's you, Ryuko," Mako says, frowning a bit. "Why're you all dressed up like Satsuki? Where's Senketsu?"

Ryuko feels her stomach churn. She barely even ate that *yakisoba-pan*, but she might just throw it all up right now.

She doesn't.

"Oh," she says, trying very hard to sound casual, but Satsuki's clothes don't have pockets or even little pouches like Senketsu does, so she can't oh-so-nonchalantly fiddle with something as though the conversation they're having is no big deal at all (which it *isn't,* of course, why would it be?).

She ends up rolling up the sleeves of Satsuki's sweater, like she's getting ready for a fist fight. "Well, Senketsu n' Satsuki just decided to hang out a little while longer, that's all," she explains.

And Ryuko smiles, sort of, melting in this horrible sweater more than ever.

And Mako's mouth falls wide open.

"You mean that *Satsuki* is wearing *Senketsu* ?!" she bursts out. "Are you sure that's okay, Ryuko?"

Ryuko flushes, turning her head away from Mako. "Why wouldn't it be?" she asks. "Senketsu is his own person, you know."

Mako can't stop looking at her funny, but eventually nods her head sagely. "Okay, Ryuko," she says, very matter-of-fact, very knowingly. "Your secret is safe with me!" She winks, offering Ryuko a wide-toothed grin, but now it's Ryuko's turn to have her own mouth fall open.

"My *what* now?" she gasps. "Mako, don't tell me that you still think that Senketsu n' me-"

"It's okay, Ryuko!" Mako repeats, patting Ryuko on the back as they walk towards their home. "You don't have to hide anything from me!"

Ryuko sighs. It's still one ear and out the other with this family sometimes, but she supposes she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Why don't I help you with the car?" Ryuko asks, smiling for real now. "It's… partly my fault that it's all covered in blood, after all." (Only *partly,* though. It's not *her* fault that overpass bridges aren't nearly as high as they *should* be.)

Mako nods her head eagerly, handing Ryuko an oversized sponge.

Okay, but maybe there's still something that's just kinda-sorta odd as hell about changing into pajamas at night and not hearing a peep from Senketsu.

Ryuko steals a glance at the bathroom mirror before going to wash Satsuki's clothes. Her hair's just as all-over-the-place as ever, and, feebly, Ryuko brings a hand to her head to push the wild strands down.

It all just fluffs back up again in moments.

Of course.

It's not like Ryuko would *like* her hair all flat and silky and refined like Satsuki, though. No way in hell. She's not that boring, and it's not *her*

fault if Senketsu's so boring that he prefers the boring-boringness of Satsuki Kiryuin over her.

Unlike that sister of hers, *Ryuko* doesn't have some stick up her ass and isn't some lame-old fine lady who drinks tea and acts all proper-like and you can tell that even from her hair and…

She's not *jealous*, okay?!

Ryuko rushes out from the bathroom with Satsuki's clothes clutched too tightly in her hands, her fingers digging into the fabric and threads. She scrambles over to the wash tub and throws the garments down more furiously than she should, and fills the basin more viciously than she should, and adds more of Mrs. Mankanshoku's laundry detergent than she should, and when she goes to scrub out all her sweat and stench, she scrubs much more aggressively than she should, too.

If it were *Senketsu* she were washing, he'd be screaming and crying at her to "be gentle!" and to "quit it!," but these clothes say nothing and Ryuko's just *fine* with that!

But when Ryuko hangs Satsuki's too-big, ugly sweater and prissy, ankle-length skirt to dry on the line, and when she heads to bed, there's an odd sensation that overtakes her, one that she can't especially explain. It's a bit out-of-body, a bit surreal, a bit *uncomfortable*, and when Ryuko pulls her polka-dotted blanket over herself, a part of her hopes that it has only been a dream, this entire atrocity of a day. She'd wake up in the morning and look to the wardrobe and there wouldn't be an empty hanger anymore and…

And what the hell is her problem, anyway? She's not five years old anymore, Ryuko tells herself, calling her dad from her dorm every night and twisting that damn phone wire 'round and 'round her fingers as he doesn't pick up. She's not fifteen anymore, listening to punk-ass bitches she woulda swore were on *her* side talking shit about her (and going outta her way to break more noses than anyone probably should).

But when Ryuko pulls her sheets completely over her head, to cover herself in total darkness, to hide away from her family and a shadowed wardrobe and abandoned hanger, sleep still only comes to her in short, nightmarish fragments full of Maiko Ogure and Fight Club and dinners all alone.

On July 8th, long before morning, Ryuko wakes with her heart racing and her body slick with sweat, and she sits up quickly, holding a hand over her mouth.

Her pajamas stick uncomfortably to her skin, but it's not nearly as uncomfortable as the horrible ache in her stomach. That *yakisoba-pan* 's getting to her, or maybe it's the Calpis, or the popcorn, but *whatever* it is, Ryuko needs the toilet.

Now.

She hurries to her feet, careful to step around her family's sleeping forms as she hops straight to the bathroom, where she promptly throws on the lights and shoves her head over the toilet bowl.

Her mouth falls open. She coughs and gags, and hardly keeps herself quiet. However selfish it is, nothing else matters right now besides getting this shit out of her.

But nothing comes. Ryuko's stomach feels ready to explode, but nothing comes.

With a groan, she leans away from the bowl, unsure if she should sit around here and wait for the inevitable vomit flood or try to sleep again, but she pauses as she catches her reflection in the water.

She nearly screams, too, when she sees the white gloves that have covered her hands.

"No…" Ryuko mumbles, shooting up to her feet.

But the cracked, murky bathroom mirror confirms everything. Her hair is even wilder than usual, spiking up unnaturally-so much so that no amount of pressing down or water or hell, even *gravity* could tame it-and it's streaked with red and blue, adorned with twisted silver that juts out from her scalp.

And it laughs at her. Her entire appearance laughs at her.

"Come on, Ryuko…" her reflection says. It has the most shit-eating grin on its face, and its eyes are wild and manic, the lids painted scarlet. "Did you *really* think he would want to stick with *you* ?"

It laughs some more, and Ryuko backs away. She leans against the wall, pulling at the blue-edged collar that brushes uncomfortably against her cheeks, but it's stuck, stitched on, and this time, no amount of tearing or snapping seems to get it to budge.

The expression in the mirror darkens. "You're so damn annoying," it says. "Actin' all high n' mighty, like you can jus' get away with anything you want 'cause you think you *deserve* it."

Ryuko stops struggling. Her reflection glowers. "But here's the thing, princess. You can't erase what you did."

It smiles once more, and Junketsu only seems to hold Ryuko tighter, its fabric pulling her so close that it's suffocating.

And Ryuko can't say anything, as her reflection laughs in her face, and Junketsu screams, and the white gloves won't go away.

And she still can't say anything, as blood covers the mirror and splatters over her, and she sees in the glass the blurry image of Senketsu drenched in red.

And so it is on July 8th that Ryuko *really* wakes with Senketsu's name on her lips.

She only barely manages to keep herself from shouting out, clamping a hand over her mouth before she can make any sound at all.

It's late-or disgustingly early (Ryuko can't say she can tell). The house is as quiet as it ever gets, filled with only the distant sounds of the screaming cicadas and the gentle *rumble* of her family's snores, and it's so dark that Ryuko can hardly tell that the hanger perched on the wardrobe is empty.

She pulls her hand away from her mouth, staring down at her blanket, ignoring the uncomfortable, too-hot feeling she has on account of her shit sleep tonight and her shit dreams.

And nervously, twittery, Ryuko bunches and bunches her sheets up in her hands, smiling a little, knowing that any other time, Senketsu would tell her to wear his glove "for protection against the nightmares!" right about now, and she'd say back (like always) that he's being ridiculous and she doesn't know where he got it in his head to spout out that kinda crap.

But she'd do what he said anyway. Of course she would. *Of course she would.*

And *of course* Senketsu would rather be with someone who never betrayed him and treated him well and Senketsu and Satsuki had even come up with Senjin-Shippu together and that's something *she* hadn't considered and it's not *Senketsu's* fault that she's terrible and he's tired of putting up with it, right?

Ryuko shakes her head, falling back into bed. No, no, she thinks, Satsuki and Senketsu can't *possibly* get along like *she* and Senketsu can, of course not, no way, Senketsu was made for *her* after all, isn't that right, and after those two spend one night together they're realize that-

That *what* ?

Ryuko turns over to her side, facing away from the wardrobe and towards Mako, who sleeps just as heavily as usual. Piles of drool puddle up across Mako's pillow, and normally, any other day, Ryuko would inch away at the sight of all that spit.

But now, tonight, Ryuko is instead filled with a sense of longing. If only *she* could get some sleep.

And then she just kinda wants to swear at the top of her lungs at the thought.

What the hell is she sittin' around moping about? It's not that she's jealous or anything petty like that and tomorrow everything will return to how it was anyway and besides there are just ways that things should be and Senketsu being with Satsuki all night isn't how things should be and Ryuko can't sleep only 'cause she's been horribly amused this whole time 'cause it's just so damn *funny* and there's a natural order to stuff and-

Okay, maybe that's not the best way to put it.

She's just-she's not *jealous*, right?

Right?

Ryuko turns over once more, back towards the abandoned hanger glistening in the starlight, and no matter how much she tells herself that it's nothing and she's *fine* and it's not like that (of course it's not), she can't sleep for the rest night, tossing and turning even worse than she did right before she first faced Satsuki all decked out in that piece-of-shit Junketsu.

It's only when streaks of morning punch her in the face that Ryuko thinks back to her dreams and Junketsu and then Senketsu covered in blood that she knows it's not *jealousy* at all, what's kept her up all night.

But the truth certainly doesn't make her feel any better, and if she could only get some damn *sleep*, she'd just stay in bed all day.

Easily.

But at 6:17 AM, Ryuko gives it up. She forces herself out from the warmth and comfort of her sheets-'cause of course *Satsuki* would be wide awake at that godawful time in the morning-and she punches in the number of Satsuki's cell on the phone, pulling the cord with her 'til both she and the phone are outside.

Cool summer air hits Ryuko's skin and the sound of ringing hits her ear and she shudders at the thought of figuring out what exactly she's going to *say* .

Just seein' if you survived one night of my obnoxious outfit, she thinks. Just checkin' up to make sure yer not dead.

The more Ryuko considers, the more ridiculous it all sounds.

The more Ryuko thinks about it, the more *uncomfortable* everything feels.

But Satsuki picks up before long, gigging incessantly. "This is Satsuki," she says, still laughing. "Hush, Senketsu! It's important to keep a proper presence on the phone!"

Well, *that* certainly doesn't make Ryuko feel any better. She blanches, clutching the phone wire tight.

"You sound well," Ryuko says, dully. Faintly, Ryuko hears Senketsu laugh, too, and it takes everything she has to hide the hurt in her voice as she adds, "Senketsu sounds great, too."

"Oh, yes," says Satsuki, trying-and failing-to keep her tone level and free of giggles. "We are both doing quite well, Ryuko. And how are you?"

Ryuko doesn't get a chance to really answer (and it's not like she would want to, anyway). Satsuki seems to turn her full attention to Senketsu right then, and the phone line is filled with incoherent fuzz and split-off conversations and laughter and Ryuko could *really* be throwing up now, probably?

But she doesn't.

"Forgive me, Ryuko," Satsuki eventually says, after an annoyingly-loud throat clearing. "Senketsu would like to talk to you, but I'm not quite sure about the best way to get him to speak over the phone-"

The line fills up once more with laughter. And fuzz. Tons and tons of fuzz.

Ryuko pulls her head away from the speaker, groaning.

"Okay!" Satsuki says soon enough, very loudly, as though she is far away. "I've put the phone against Senketsu. Can you hear him?"

Ryuko scowls. "I can just hear you, actually."

"Very funny, Ryuko," comes Senketsu. His voice is still a bit fuzzy, but it's clear enough that Ryuko can tell that he is in high spirits. There's a bounce in his tone-the kind he gets when he's being ironed or when they go flying in Senketsu-Shippu.

And Ryuko didn't even think it was possible at this point, but her own spirits fall below the ground and straight into the Earth's core at that. She can't find anything to say back to Senketsu, standing with the old landline phone held up against her face and her fingers nervously twirling and twirling the coiled wire, her whole body burning hot no matter the chill, early-morning summer breeze that can't stop hitting her.

Senketsu must notice. Of course he does.

"Are you all right, Ryuko?" he asks, all kindness and worry, and Ryuko can only clench her fist around the phone wire at the sound of it.

"'Course I am," she says, so loudly that she might-probably be bothering the too-close neighbors whose houses are just about rammed up against her own. "In fact, it was *so* nice to get a break from your annoying ass!"

Ryuko spits onto the ground, scoffing like she's about to go fight up against the latest competitor ever. "I think you should stay with Satsuki longer!" she says.

Senketsu is quiet. Ryuko's heart races in her chest. Well, it *is* nice to get away from how he can read shit like *that* so easily.

Not like being distanced really stops *him*, though, and he says, very Concerned, "Ryuko, are you-"

And Ryuko clutches the phone wire so hard she might just have to invest in a new one again.

"I said you should just stay with Satsuki longer, didn't I?!"

She doesn't wait to hear anything more. Ryuko busts back into the house, slamming the phone down with a too-loud huff, her face very red and her heart still beating way too quickly.

If this is the way it's gonna be, she thinks, it's completely fine! It's *more* than fine! She's just so incredibly, wonderfully fucking *fine* !

And maybe Ryuko would just simmer in her complete and total *fine* -ness, but a knock sounds on the door before she even knows it, startling all her thoughts and leaving her suddenly *very* aware of the fact that she's breathing hard and fuming after talking with her clothes on the phone at 6:30 in the morning.

But something tells her that the door is for her, so Ryuko makes her way over, giving absolutely no shits about how her hair must be even *worse* than usual and giving even less shits about how the strands really oughta be stickin' up in fifty different directions and she also doesn't give any shits about how she hasn't changed out of her pajamas and she definitely, absolutely, 100% doesn't fucking care about the dark circles that must be drooping off her eyes because she slept worse than garbage and would probably just fall over if she weren't so *fine* right about now.

So Ryuko opens the door, looking very much like the trash she slept like, only to see none other than Senketsu and Satsuki themselves.

And she promptly slams the door in their faces.

Satsuki wrenches it right back open. Ryuko scowls.

"You really flew all the way over here?" she asks. She tastes the nasty-ass morning breath in her mouth, and she hopes it smells just as bad as it feels. "What the fuck for?"

Well, that makes Satsuki look quite Exasperated. "What *for* ?" she repeats. "Because of this sight before me!" She gestures up and down at Ryuko, her motions uncharacteristically sloppy and frenzied-but completely-characteristically full of Concern.

Ryuko only feels her irritation grow. "Says the one wearing Senketsu around like that in the middle of the street," she says, dully.

But neither Satsuki nor Senketsu are really paying any attention to *her* anymore, quite content with talking among themselves as though Ryuko isn't even there.

"I told you," Senketsu is saying, his voice obnoxiously matter-of-fact, like *his* I'm-only-a-year-old ass really knows more than anyone else, "Ryuko needs someone to keep her in check. It was selfish of me to leave her alone all night."

Satsuki frowns. Ryuko could spontaneously combust. Mako tells her people have done that at her dad's "hospital" before. It's possible.

But she doesn't.

Satsuki says, "Senketsu, but what if it's simply the stress of-"

And Ryuko can't take another word. "I am *right fucking here*," she says-well, just-about-screams-to-the-heavens, more like. "You wanna say something about my appearance or whatever the hell else, you can say it to my fucking face! Or blow it out your fucking ass!"

And Satsuki raises one of her giant caterpillar-butt eyebrows at Ryuko at *that* outburst. "Ryuko, as your older sister, I am just concerned-"

And, well, Ryuko doesn't wait to any more. She slams the door on the two of them (again), fuming. She would have thought that this patronizing crap was behind Satsuki ever since the two of them had figured out their blood connection, but now she's half-convinced that this shit has just become even *worse* : it's gone from *just* patronizing to the kind of garbage, over-protective, big-sister, *patronizing for your own good* crap.

And it's just made even *worse* when added on to Senketsu's already worry-warty self.

And it's only after Ryuko has stood still for a good few seconds that she notices the entire Mankanshoku family behind her.

"Don't say *anything*," she says, and she storms off into the main room before they even have a chance to stop her, as if she could *really* get away that easily, grimacing as she catches the sight of Satsuki and Senketsu in the window.

Ryuko slams that shut in their faces, too.

Doesn't stop them from running their mouths, though.

"Senketsu would like to say that he cares about you very much, Ryuko!" Satsuki shouts, her voice just as loud as it had been when she'd spouted out orders from the top of Honnouji Academy. (Her tone is just as irritatingly commandeering and contentious, too.)

"And Satsuki loves you very much herself!" Senketsu adds.

"We'll be back in the morning!" they shout together, and though Ryuko doesn't watch, she hears them fly away, chattering among themselves, and she falls back to her sheets at the sound of it, pulling the covers up 'til her shoulders.

Well, there's no way she's going to school today. No way, no way, *no way.*

But Mako is in the room in only a moment, peering over at Ryuko with big bug eyes. "Ryuuuuko," she says, leaning over, her hair brushing up against her neck, "we have to get ready to go or we'll be late again!"

Ryuko pulls the covers completely over. "I'm sick," she says. She turns the farthest away she can from Mako, scowling to herself.

"Yeah, *heartsick* !" Mako cries. With a great huff, she pulls Ryuko's sheets away and scowls a scowl that could rival Ryuko's own, refusing to let Ryuko grab back her covers (no matter how much Ryuko's hands reach over to snatch them back from Mako's grip).

"Ryuko, you can't cure your heartache moping around here, so stop it! You're not gonna win the fight for Senketsu's heart lying around here on the floor all day!"

Well, *that* brings Ryuko right up to her feet.

"The *what* ?!" she gasps, hardly keeping herself from falling over.

Mako gets very, very close to Ryuko's face.

"You heard me!" she shouts. "The. Fight. For. Senketsu's. Heart!"

Ryuko's mouth falls open. Her face burns.

Mako can't stop staring at her with starry eyes.

"Two sisters," Mako says, dreamily, "torn apart by love! What tragedy! What *horror* !"

Ryuko could die.

She doesn't.

"Okay, first of all, there is nothing appealing about that kinda situation," Ryuko manages to say. "But you're misunderstandin' again. It's not-"

"You don't have to lie to me, Ryuko!" Mako cries. She drapes a dramatic arm across her forehead, shutting her eyes and leaning over as though the weight of what's going on is too much to handle.

"I see the way you look at Senketsu!" she says. "I see-"

And Ryuko promptly snatches her blanket back from the distracted Mako and pushes herself right back under them. "I'msickandstayinginbed," she says, but Mako lifts her up as though she's nothing, the covers falling away.

"W-what are you doing?!" Ryuko blubbers. She struggles to break free, but Mako's grip doesn't let up one bit.

"I'm rooting for you!" Mako declares. "You are going to win this war! I'll make sure of it!"

Mako brings Ryuko right into the bathroom and plops her flat down onto a chair that seems to have come from nowhere because Ryuko is sure it wasn't there last night and she's slept like shit and-

God, all she wants right now is just to *sleep.*

Ryuko sighs (for what feels like the millionth time in the last 24 hours). "Look," she starts to say, but she stops pretty abruptly when she catches sight of her reflection in the mirror.

Oh, she thinks. She *does* look horrible. For real.

Her hair is sticking up in every direction, defying all logic, reason, and, well, that gravity thing. It seems more than impossible to have just woken up like that, but there her hair hangs above her, a frizzy, wild mass of human and Life Fiber and…

Right. Maybe it's *not* so weird, being what she is.

Ryuko turns away, quiet. There's only so much lookin' at herself that she can stand, especially when her pajamas are crinkled and too tight and falling off at the same time and her face is all red and her eyes are all bloodshot like she's been crying but she *hasn't* been cryin' not a bit not even a little she hasn't she-

And Ryuko is quite quickly forced to notice that Mako's taken a wet brush to her hair. She gasps suddenly, breaking herself away from her thoughts, grimacing as cold water drips down her neck and forehead.

"… and once Senketsu sees how popular you are," Mako is saying, and Ryuko realizes all at once that she hasn't heard a *word* of whatever the heck Mako had been goin' on about up to this point, "he'll see *just* what he's missing and come running right back! He'll see that he's *your* uniform and only yours!"

"But he's not," Ryuko says. The words come out much calmer than she had expected, and even she is surprised by the composed tone she's taken on. "He's not *mine.* He can do whatever he wants…"

Mako pauses in her furious brushing of Ryuko's hair. "And *date* anyone he wants?" she asks. "Look deep inside yourself, Ryuko! You don't want Senketsu with anyone but you and you know it! You have to fight!"

Ryuko feels her hair deflate-and not from Mako's brushing "Why would I have to do that?" she asks. "It's his life."

"But what about *your* life?!" Mako cries. She stands before Ryuko, placing her hands firmly on Ryuko's shoulders, squeezing, tight. "Ryuko, you deserve happiness with Senketsu!"

Ryuko pushes Mako's hands away, her touch gentle. "You're still misunderstanding," she says, and then she smiles a little, as much as she can. "Senketsu and I aren't like that at all."

"But-" Mako tries, her eyes very wide, but Ryuko squeezes Mako's hands now, and the girl quiets.

"We're not like that," Ryuko repeats. She stands, and Mako doesn't try to stop her as she leaves the bathroom, her hair dripping icy water that falls to the floor and across her pajama top, and as she prepares herself for the day.

She's *fine*, Ryuko tells herself. There's no reason to stay in bed. She and Senketsu aren't anything like *that* at all, so what reason is there to be upset? To sit around mopin' all day?

None. No reason at all!

So why is it, Ryuko thinks, as she sits in class that day, and hastily finishes her homework, and unenthusiastically jams food into her mouth at lunch, that she can't stop thinking of him? Why is it that every classmate that passes her by reminds her of him, and his stupid comfortable fabric, and reminds her of how he isn't there to talk with her anymore, and to tell her to calm down, and-

Mako's gasp breaks through Ryuko's thoughts. It takes Ryuko a moment to realize that the hamburger steak between her chopsticks had fallen right to the ground.

"How *horrible* !" Mako cries. She frowns at Ryuko, her expression very serious. "Ryuko, you have *got* to talk to Senketsu!" she pleads.

"Otherwise, there will be more unnecessary food death!"

Ryuko scoffs. "Food death?" she repeats. "Aren't you just going to eat that anyway?"

Mako already has the fallen bit of steak in her hand, and she turns a bit red at Ryuko's accusation. "T-that doesn't matter!" she insists, jamming the hamburger steak into her mouth. "You still have to talk to Senketsu!"

"I'm glad to get a break from that obnoxious know-it-all," Ryuko answers, just as she has been this whole time, poking chopsticks into her smiling *tako* sausage, but she drops some lettuce and tomato to the ground before lunch is over, and she can't pay any attention at all to her afternoon classes, no matter how much she knows she ought to be thinking about end-of-term exams.

On July 8th, Mrs. Mankanshoku prepares a bath for Ryuko after dinner, just as she always does.

"Take as long as you like, dear," she says, extra sweetly, more so than usual, and Ryuko tries very hard to hide her embarrassment.

She just wasn't hungry, she wants to say. *That's* the only reason why she just pecked at her food more than she ate it.

But Ryuko still spends an extra-extra-long time in the bath, drenching herself in the horrible, wonderful stench of cucumber and vanilla, trying to let herself believe that it'd be enough to make her feel better, and to quell her fears, and to allow her to imagine, just for a moment, that she is not alone.

And maybe it would have worked, if Mako hadn't caught Ryuko returning Mrs. Mankanshoku's homemade laundry detergent to its proper place.

Mako looks Ryuko up and down then, her eyes catching on Ryuko's wet hair and the detergent pail still clutched in her hands.

"Ryuko," she says, very slowly. "What were you doing?"

"Taking a bath," Ryuko answers. Her grip around the detergent pail tightens. She feels very hot.

Very *uncomfortable* .

"With Mom's laundry detergent?" Mako asks. She frowns, only for her eyes to get so big that Ryuko becomes half-convinced that they'll bug right outta her face.

"Oh. My. God!" Mako cries. She gets very close to Ryuko's face, that bug-eyed look still very much staying put. "Your love for Senketsu is so strong, you even want to *smell* like him! How romantic!

Mako's expression darkens. "How *tragic* !"

And Ryuko is so exhausted and overwhelmed that she can't find it in her to even be surprised or offended at Mako's outburst.

She just stands very still, her hair dripping, her grip on the laundry detergent slipping.

What *was* she even doing?

Mako takes a hold of Ryuko's free hand. "Ryuko," she says, "you have got to fight! Fight for your love!"

Somehow, Ryuko manages to shake her head. "You've got it all wrong," she tells Mako, for what must be the umpteenth time. "It's just, I'm… I'm part-clothes, right? So who says I even *can* love, huh? And-and, who says I should even use human stuff in my baths, huh? Maybe I shoulda been usin' laundry detergent my whole damn-"

And Mako quite abruptly takes Ryuko by the shoulders. "Do you want me to iron you now, too?!" she cries. She's got a wild, almost

manic look to her now, her big brown eyes wider than ever. "Ryuko, listen to yourself! You can't *replace* Senketsu by *being* him! You are Ryuko! You aren't Senketsu! You have to fight, fight, fight!"

Ryuko looks away. "Fight for *what* ?" she asks.

And Mako looks more than ready to spout on and on about *that*, but Ryuko's grip on the laundry detergent just so happens to slip completely right then, and the pail falls to the ground, dumping laundry powder all over the floor.

"Shit," Ryuko says at the sight, and she groans, and she falls to the ground herself, to pick up the mess she made, but something about that damn tipped-over, rejected laundry detergent pail and the scattered powder brings a sob to her throat, and she clasps a hand over her mouth to keep from crying out.

Mako softens at the sight, not even hesitating to crouch down beside Ryuko, wrapping gentle arms around her.

"Ryuko," she says, and there is none of the dramatic flair or fighting spirit in her tone any longer, "you have to talk to him."

Ryuko dully nods her head. She swallows back her tears, calms her breathing. "Yeah," she says, quietly. "Yeah. You're right."

And shyly, she brings her own arms around Mako, and returns the hug.

It's not until the late evening that Ryuko sums up the courage to call Senketsu, and she stands a long moment before the phone, her hair now dried, the stench of cucumber and vanilla filling her 'til she feels sick.

Mako gives her two thumbs up. Ryuko takes a deep breath, reaching her hand for the phone…

And the phone promptly rings as soon as her skin makes contact with the cheap plastic.

Ryuko picks it up, hesitantly. Mako scurries away with a grin.

"Hello?"

There's silence, and then, quietly, "Ryuko."

Senketsu. Ryuko can't help herself. She freezes up at the sound, twirling the phone wire in her fingers.

"Senketsu," she says, "I…"

She doesn't know what to say. Ryuko swallows, shuts her eyes. It's so much different over the phone. She just wishes… she just wishes…

"I'm worried about you," Senketsu says for Ryuko, filling the space. "Satsuki is, too. We're going to come over in the morning."

Ryuko manages a laugh. She acts like it's a surprise, like she hadn't heard them declare that they were coming back just this morning.

"Again?" she asks. "You were just here!" She tries to force another one of her lies, that she'd hoped they'd stay away a little while longer no matter what they'd said before, because she was *just* starting to get used to all the peace and quiet she got without his annoying ass around.

But Ryuko can't do it anymore, and she's silent, her mouth dry.

"We have… something to tell you," Senketsu says, and Ryuko doesn't get any time to react to that as he shouts a hasty, "Goodbye!" and the line goes dead.

Ryuko takes a long moment before she puts down the phone, and when she finally forces herself to, she does it slowly, quietly, standing horribly still.

It's only when she sees Mako in the corner of her eye that she grits her teeth together, her hands folding into fists.

"Well," Ryuko says, much more loudly than needed, "if there was a fight here, I sure got my ass handed to me!"

Mako's smile falls, and she is uncharacteristically quiet, and she stays that way as they prepare themselves for bed-for sleep that Ryuko knows will never come.

Something to tell you, she thinks.

So, it's true after all.

Morning takes too long to come.

Ryuko rises as soon as she sees the first glimmers of light, stepping quietly outside to watch the sunrise.

She pushes away the thoughts of Senketsu watching the sunrise with her when she couldn't get any rest.

She pushes away the thoughts of wearing his glove to bed.

She pushes away the thoughts of sleeping with her hand over her heart, to keep that worry wart satisfied with the sound of her heart.

Ryuko absolutely, positively, most-definitely does *not* think about any of that shit as scarlet and orange and dandelion-yellow light up the sky, so she doesn't know why her face is wet when she comes back into the house and why her insides are so twisted up with her *real* issue here that she can barely breathe.

She wipes her face as quickly as she can muster when she sees Mako already awake.

"You're up early," she blubbers, as nonchalantly as she can (which is about as "nonchalant" as a Mako ten centimeters away from an all-

you-can-eat buffet).

Mako pays Ryuko's tone no mind, though. "Of course I'm up, silly!" she says. She seems to want to be whispering 'cause the rest of her family's still asleep, but there's a kind of bubbly excitement in her that has it so she's just-about shouting. "I have to help you get prettied up!"

"Prettied up?" Ryuko repeats.

"Of. Course!" Mako cries. She takes her hands from behind her back, revealing one of the new frilly outfits she'd gotten on one of their shopping trips.

Mako shakes the fabric with a grin, and Ryuko doesn't have the chance to say or do anything as Mako grabs her by the hand and rushes her to the bathroom with an over-eager, "Come on!"

Ryuko only manages to escape Mako's makeover to open the door for Satsuki and Senketsu, but by that time, it's already too late. Her hair is tied back into two girlish pigtails, and to make her even *more* of an eyesore, they're all held up by pink ribbons that match the oversized bows on the frilly, ruffly, pink-and-purple dress drenched in lace that Mako had *begged* her to put on.

Her entire ensemble *also* matches her bubblegum-pink lipstick.

"You're going to wear clothes so cute that Senketsu'll be green with envy!" Mako had said. "And the rest of you will be even cuter! He won't be able to resist!"

And, well, Ryuko thinks she must actually look like some ridiculous cosplayer who's lost her way to her convention-and she's probably a million times more uncomfortable than a girl in that situation, too-but she pulls open the door for Satsuki and Senketsu in the ridiculous get-up all the same. (And tries *very* hard to ignore their wide-eyed stares.)

"So, what's so important that you had to come all the way over here to tell me about?" Ryuko asks, as casually as she can muster, but she knows that she can only sound so *casual* when she's wearing an outfit and makeup more fit for a magical girl anime than reality.

And she can only *be* so casual when she knows that Senketsu has decided to leave her for Satsuki.

For good.

She clenches her fist at the thought.

Satsuki can't stop with the staring. Neither can Senketsu. He's a navy blue dress today, not too unlike his usual self (though, being on *Satsuki,* his fabric falls to her ankles, *of course*), and his eyes rest on a red scarf that Satsuki has tied around her head as a headband.

"Well, Ryuko," Satsuki eventually manages to say, averting her eyes oddly, "I think… Senketsu would like to sit down, for this."

"Well, Senketsu can tell me that himself, can't he?" Ryuko asks in a huff, but she softens a bit as Satsuki holds out a bag for her.

"I know it's a bit early," Satsuki says, "but I made these for you earlier this morning. I hope you like them, and that they're still warm."

Ryuko takes the gift with a heavy heart. A *consolation prize*, huh?

Part of Ryuko wants to be angry at the gesture, but she only feels a mixture of guilt and pity and shame when Satsuki explains, "It's nothing much, but I thought you would like some homemade *yakisoba-pan* after the other day."

Ryuko swallows the lump in her throat as she peers inside and sees the neatest fucking *yakisoba-pan* she has ever seen-with *yakisoba* so damn perfectly kept inside the bun!-all enclosed in cutesy-pink food storage boxes that Ryuko would have never, *ever* fathomed her sister having.

"Thanks, Sis," she manages to say, and she lets them in, prompting an overly-excited Mrs. Mankanshoku to make them all some tea.

But Senketsu is quick to drop the news before any tea arrives and before Ryuko even has a chance to open up the *yakisoba-pan*, running his mouth almost as soon as they sit at the table.

"Ryuko," he says, all nervousness and anticipation and quiet enthusiasm, Ryuko trembling horribly at all of it, hardly even able to breathe, "Satsuki and I wanted to tell you that…"

Senketsu looks up at Satsuki before he goes on. Ryuko is so uncomfortable she can barely believe her Life Fiber-infused heart hasn't just given up by now.

But it clearly hasn't, and Satsuki nods her head, and together, she and Senketsu look right at Ryuko as they say, quite matter-of-fact, "We're dating now."

And, well, Ryuko is quite silent for a long, long moment.

Satsuki's cheeks flush. Senketsu sweats.

And then, without any warning at all, Ryuko breaks out laughing.

She doesn't even know how she has it in her to get such a bombastic sound out of herself on account of her shit sleeping for the last two days, but somehow, loud, shrill laughter pours out of Ryuko, and she pounds her hand on the table, blinking tears from her eyes.

"I don't see what is so funny," Satsuki says, sounding hurt.

But Ryuko just keeps laughing through it. "Okay," she says, amidst giggles, "you're tellin' me that-that…" She pauses, more and more laughter spilling from her lips, her chest aching as she wheezes and gasps for air.

"You're tellin' me that," she tries again, still spluttering out laughter, still hardly able to breathe, "that-that-that Satsuki Kiryuin- *Satsuki motherfucking Kiryuin* -is dating- *dating* - *my* Senketsu? That *Satsuki Kiryuin* and-"

But, well, Ryuko can't quite go on after that.

That's right, she thinks. Not *her* Senketsu. Not anymore.

Ryuko grits her teeth together. She laughs again, but it's no longer the kind that's for something funny.

"So, it's true, huh?" she asks. "You're-you're really… pushing me out, huh? Don't wanna be *my* uniform anymore, huh?"

Somehow, Ryuko gets up to smiling so hard that her face hurts. "Well, it's about time!" she says. She leans back, crosses her arms as coolly as she can. "Being my uniform must blow! And-and, I was *just* thinkin' 'bout how nice it was-"

"Ryuko." It's Senketsu, his voice carrying none of his annoying, know-it-all sassiness, instead full of sappy, feel-good goo that makes Ryuko feel a million, trillion times worse. Senketsu wouldn't bother to be an asshole when he's dumping her ass, of all times he *should* be an asshole?

She's just about ready to call him the biggest dick in the world, but Senketsu speaks first, his voice far too gentle, too kind.

"Is that what this is all about?" he asks. "You think I would abandon you?" A bit of laughter comes over him. "After all we've been through, Ryuko? Why in the world would I leave you now?"

"Because you're an obnoxious outfit and it took ya this long to get it through yer head that you shouldn't bother with someone like me," Ryuko says-mumbles more like-her face very red, her fake-ass smile long gone, and her eyes very sore.

She fiddles with the ends of the pink ribbon on her frilly bodice, keeping her eyes fixed on the stupid thing. "But it still took ya less time than my dad, so I guess you're not *that* out of your mind."

"Ryuko." Senketsu has gone right into a somber sort of Seriousness, and it makes Ryuko's stomach turn and turn. "I would never, ever leave you," he says. "You know that, right?"

Ryuko is silent. Senketsu sighs.

"Ryuko, Satsuki is my girlfriend, but you-you're my soulmate."

Ryuko looks up to see Satsuki nodding her head. "I couldn't keep the two of you apart if I tried," she says, with a wink. "You're "two in one," remember?"

Ryuko looks away, but even she can't help the small smile coming over her. "Is-is that so?" she asks.

"It is," says Senketsu. "Now, why don't you take that ridiculous outfit off and put me on instead? I can be anything you'd like!"

He looks towards the bag Ryuko's left on the table. "And you should make it quick! Before the *yakisoba-pan* get cold!"

"This coming from *you* ?" Ryuko wants to say, but she doesn't, her entire being overwhelmed with something so strange and new and different that she can't speak.

But it's not *uncomfortable* . None of this is uncomfortable at all.

And okay, maybe Ryuko smiles *just a bit* and is *just a bit* glad when Satsuki's scarf comes her way, and she brings him into her arms, and she wraps him around her neck, just like they'd done when she had sworn on everything that she would bring him back if it were the last thing she ever did.

And when Ryuko finally returns her sister's clothes, and goes to come back into her own, she thinks that someday soon, she will be

too old for sailor uniforms, and Senketsu will be too old to *be* sailor uniforms, too.

But right now, on the brisk, balmy morning of July 9th, Ryuko is still in high school, and still a teenage girl, and she thinks, she's going to enjoy that for as long as she can.

And she's glad, and satisfied, and so damn *comfortable*, that she doesn't have to say a word to Senketsu about any of it, as he comes to her, and she comes to him, just as they always had.

A/N: The following notes have been cut for size. The entire commentary with links can be found on my blog (add the dot com and remove spaces): marshmallowgoop . tumblr /post/160216885212/just-some-authors-notescommentary-regarding-my

Cultural Notes: *Japanese movie theaters often have special discount days for tickets, one of which being Ladies' Day. On Ladies' Day (often Wednesday), women can get movie tickets for cheap (around 40% off!)*

In the context of "comfortable," though, this means that Satsuki is a bit of a bad influence, as she decides to go to the movies with Ryuko and Senketsu on a Wednesday right before what would be the end of the first term (in a trimester-system Japanese school year). This is why Ryuko notes "end-of-term exams" later in the story; assuming that Rinne-Dou High School follows a trimester system, the end of Ryuko's term would be around July 20th, and "comfortable" takes place from July 7th through July 9th.

The date July 7th also holds significance in the story, because as the seventh day of the seventh month, July 7th could mean the Star Festival, Tanabata (I say could because calendar differences make it so Tanabata is both celebrated in July and August, depending on the region). Since Tanabata is the yearly celebration of two lovers-the stars Vega (Orihime) and Altair (Hikoboshi)-coming together when

they are kept apart for all other days of the year (by the Milky Way), perhaps it's only fitting that, in "comfortable," Ryuko, Senketsu, and Satsuki decide to see a romantic, cheesy move set in space on the typical day for the Tanabata celebration.

Tanabata holds extra meaning in regards to Ryuko and Senketsu, as the story behind Tanabata is, much as Ryuko and Senketsu's canonical ending, a story of two people torn apart by a force greater than them. In the case of Orihime and Hikoboshi, it is Orihime's father, Tentei, the god of the sky-who had initially arranged for Orihime and Hikoboshi to come together in the first place!-who ultimately tears them apart. Similarly, in the case of Ryuko and Senketsu, Ryuko's father, Isshin, literally made Senketsu for Ryuko… but Senketsu is taken from Ryuko as soon as his life's duty is fulfilled-and there's perhaps the implication that Isshin only ever intended for him to live that long, as Senketsu's so-called "Infinite Absorption Ability" clearly has a set limit.

While "comfortable" obviously doesn't follow the canon ending of Kill la Kill *because Senketsu lives, the heart of the story is rooted in this idea of being taken away and separated from a loved one.*

Additionally, Calpis, the drink Ryuko gets at the movie theater, is a milk-based soft drink that actually first launched on July 7th, 1919. The original packaging for the drink was even star themed to match this Tanabata launching date.

For some final notes, yakisoba-pan *is as described in the fic-it's* yakisoba *(fried noodles) stuffed in* pan *(bread) in the form of a hot dog bun. It's pretty typical convenience-store food.*

Lastly, in a Japanese public restroom, the stall walls allegedly go all the way down to the ground. As such, Ryuko and Satsuki couldn't pass anything under the stalls.

***Other References:** Satsuki and Senketsu's criticisms of the film were based off of things that Neil Degrasse Tyson has tweeted/said.*

Theme/Character Notes:*… On the one hand, "comfortable" was a fic inspired by the vastly underappreciated Senketsu/Satsuki dynamic. Though the two have only canonically spoken once, their rad team-up in episode 21 to save Ryuko and their similar calm, sensible, analytical personalities make them a friendship I would love to see develop. So much of "comfortable" came out of the idea that Satsuki and Senketsu would just so hit it off after the events of* Kill la Kill*, as I can imagine the pair having similar interests-and the kind that would probably bore the impatient, hot-headed Ryuko (especially given the fact that Senketsu actively spent a whole week of his tiny life just studying books in the library while Ryuko slept the entire time).*

The idea of Ryuko having to deal with Senketsu and Satsuki being total nerds together was an amusing image, but from there the real heart and message of "comfortable" came to be: a relationship does not have to be romantic to be important or significant, and the start of a romance should not destroy all relationships that aren't romantic…

pretend - Satsuki, Ryuko

pretend

Satsuki is eighteen years old, when her sister dies.

She watches the murder live from a tall, pixelated, monochrome monitor where everything looks green even when it should be red and the sight of the bullet piercing her sister's chest is just as green as anything has ever looked on those screens.

All those by Satsuki's side gasp and turn away and her way and shudder and grimace but Satsuki does nothing of the sort and can do nothing of the sort and is silent and staring as this girl somehow still clings to the cloth around her as though her lifeless arms could really protect it and somewhere deep down inside Satsuki hates all her cameras and the fact that she must be sitting here right here and now.

But when the murderer escapes with her sister's corpse Satsuki only says it's a shame that all their data collecting amounted to so little and it's a shame how worthless Matoi ended up being. The fisherman is supposed to profit from the struggle between the sandpiper and the clam but here she is gaining nothing but more work.

She says they'll have to collect Matoi's Kamui eventually and stands from her seat and walks away from the scene and does not speak of how she has never before witnessed the death of another, never, not even once, not like that.

No one questions her confident steps or wobbling frown and when the night falls and it is Satsuki's toilet that is very much filled with green she clutches the bowl and coughs and gags and is sure that

none will ever know of any of it. She curses herself and scolds herself and tells herself that she hasn't the time to be so weak.

She has to pretend. Satsuki can't afford to stop pretending.

No, but that's a dream.

It's nothing more than a dream, Satsuki reminds herself, when she wakes exactly where she expects, her wrists aching, and water dripping from the ceiling.

Satsuki is eighteen years old, when her sister dies.

She herself delivers the killing blow, plunging the black blade of Bakuzan deep into Matoi's mutated, macabre, green-and-red chest, listening as the monster wails, crumpling to its knees, its voice inhuman and no longer recognizably Matoi's, a conglomeration of man and beast. Satsuki keeps her hands on the hilt of her sword and does not think about how hard she breathes as the monster looks to the wound and up to her and then down again and up again and Satsuki would say that when the monster peers into her eyes in its last moment that it cries, if a monster is truly capable of such a thing.

The monster moans once more before slumping over on its side, blood pooling out of its jagged teeth and from its torn-open chest, and Satsuki backs slowly away, her vision filling with red, Junketsu slipping from its Overridden form, and somewhere deep down inside Satsuki thinks that Matoi ought to at least be allowed to die as herself.

But the mangled, monstrous form remains and Satsuki does not know if she could stand so still and keep pretending had she instead been forced to see the girl with the peacock-blue hair and the navy-blue uniform motionless and bleeding from the black blade still warm from Satsuki's grip.

Laughter fills the air, overly cheerful, sickeningly bubbly. Satsuki clenches her fists.

She says she had no choice but to put the girl down and asks if it isn't just how Nui Harime wanted it.

No, but that's a dream, too.

It's nothing more than a dream, Satsuki scolds herself, reminds herself, nothing more than a dream, a dream, a *dream.*

But Satsuki is not so certain now about the water that falls from the ceiling.

Satsuki is only a year old, when her sister dies. *That* is not a dream.

Her father tells her so himself, when she is five, leaning down so that he can meet her eyes, his lips spilling out a horrible, ghastly reality. He wraps her in a hug and pats her head and brushes away her tears and eventually Satsuki finds it in herself to ask how it is she is to succeed.

She asks how to become strong.

Her father does not answer for a long moment. He stands silent, staring, as though considering very hard, as though wondering if he ever should have spoken at all.

But he does not leave Satsuki with nothing and he says that she must never show any weakness and cannot cry or let anyone ever see her hurt and above all else she must always, *always* pretend.

Never reveal who you really are, Satsuki, lest anyone discover the truth.

But how could that man speak of truth, when it was all a lie?

Satsuki is eighteen years old, when she is too late.

She is freed from dreams and freed from her mother and freed from her month-long torture but she is too late and she does not know she is too late and she can hardly think at all.

Satsuki rushes her sister's way with heavy breaths and hands drenched in the blood of someone else and she smears that blood upon the ground and crumples to her knees and looks over the fallen girl who is very still and very silent and looks blankly to the sky.

She speaks the girl's name. She says that Nui Harime is taken care of. She says, You ought to get mad at me for doing that for you.

But the girl does not answer. She is much too quiet and too calm and too serene and Satsuki does not notice the small crowd that has gathered around them that look to their feet and she does not hear their sobs and cries either because all Satsuki knows is this girl with the mass of peacock-blue hair and pale skin and blue lips when there should be no more blue, not anymore, not now.

Satsuki repeats the girl's name. She takes the girl's hand into her own and the flesh is cold and clammy and the nails match the sky no matter how much she squeezes and how much she shouts out that name and she only shuts her mouth and does not speak when she notices the trail of red from her sister's blue lips.

Satsuki does not realize then that the girl had been vomiting blood but the sight brings her to see the red across her hand that holds her sister's hand and brings her to acknowledge the red all beneath her and over the ground but most of all she looks towards the red still spilling across the girl's uniform and Satsuki can only think on how the red is not vanishing and the wound is not going away and she had done this and she could not take it back.

Mankanshoku's voice breaks through Satsuki's thoughts. She says that Ryuko didn't want to be alone, she didn't, she never did. She says that's why Senketsu wouldn't leave Ryuko, but Ryuko's all alone now. She had to go all alone and nobody went with her.

The words fall into incomprehensible sobs. Satsuki becomes very aware of how they are all looking at her and her hand still clasped in her sister's and she becomes even more aware of how they are all expecting something from her.

But Satsuki does not know what. Satsuki does not even know who this girl is. She does not even know what this girl went through, and does not know of this girl's loneliness, and the days spent longing and wishing and yearning for a hand to hold, and she does not know any of it and cannot know any of it and she pulls her hand away and she laughs and laughs and laughs until she cannot breathe.

She says that Matoi is a fool and a wretch and a disgrace and a dishonor and how dare you die on me like this you useless swine you worthless child you imbecilic sister. Satsuki gags on the word as it slips out and she coughs and gasps and chokes on her laughter but the girl still does not move and neither does Senketsu and as the blood continues to rush away Satsuki thinks on Mankanshoku's words and how Matoi had never wanted to be alone and somewhere deep inside she is five years old again and there is the boy with the string doll who tells her that he didn't want her to be alone and she is thinking of smiling at the sentiment but she must not she must pretend she must pretend she must pretend.

But she smiles anyway. Satsuki smiles anyway, and the boy's eyes light up, and he takes his hand in hers, and asks if she won't play with him.

Mankanshoku takes Satsuki's hand now. She says that Ryuko wanted to apologize, you know. She wanted to say sorry. She wanted you to know that she's sorry she couldn't make it.

And Satsuki is five years old again. Her father is wiping away her tears and telling her to be strong. She is five years old and she stands before her mirror at night and looks deep into her own eyes and says that she has to pretend she must pretend she cannot afford to not pretend.

And Mankanshoku squeezes Satsuki's hand now, and Satsuki is eight years old again. She's eight years old and Soroi is by her side and dressing the wounds on her palms and twisting around her fingers. She's eight years old and sore and hurting and her throat is clogged up but she will not cry she cannot she will not and Soroi says that it's okay to stop pretending sometimes, my lady, I know you, I know you.

And Satsuki is eighteen years old and Mankanshoku cannot stop crying and all are staring her way and there is a dead girl before her and Satsuki is eighteen years old and dreaming and waking up in a cell and longing and wishing and yearning to say everything she's always wanted to say.

But Satsuki is eighteen years old and she is too late and she can only speak that name to one who can no longer hear it.

A/N: The entire commentary with links can be found on my blog (add the dot com and remove spaces): marshmallowgoop . tumblr /post/161005946302/just-some-authors-notescommentary-regarding-my

Cultural Notes: *Early on in the story, Satsuki says, "The fisherman is supposed to profit from the struggle between the sandpiper and the clam," which refers to an old Chinese proverb. (Satsuki also makes use of this proverb in episode 5 of the anime, where the first scene of the fic "takes place.")*

The proverb relates to a story about a clam and a sandpiper (or snipe) who fight one another, only for both to become losers when their quarrel allows a fisherman to easily throw a net over them both.

In the episode, Satsuki deems the fight between Tsumugu and Ryuko a "struggle between a sandpiper and a clam," implying that she is the "fisherman" who will be the only one to benefit from their battle.

Theme/Character Notes: *"pretend" is perhaps totally self-explanatory. The short details Satsuki's struggles to pretend to be the cruel, dictatorial president of Honnouji Academy that her mother wants her to be… and then her struggles to finally stop pretending when the gig is up.*

Much of the story takes place in dreams; after the reveal that Ryuko is her sister, Satsuki is shaken and reconsiders her entire plan. While being held prisoner by Ragyo, Satsuki can't stop thinking about what she'd done, slipping into nightmares where Ryuko dies and she still heartlessly acts out her role no matter how much the death hurts her inside.

Once freed, the canon Kill la Kill *plot goes into the Junketsu!Ryuko arc, and that happens in the fic, too. However, pulling off Junketsu does take Ryuko's life here (and Ryuko exhibits symptoms of hypovolemic shock), and so Satsuki never really gets the chance to "stop pretending" for Ryuko. Ryuko never gets to know who Satsuki actually is, and Satsuki realizes that she never especially gets to know who Ryuko is, either.*

But the real heart of the story is that Satsuki fears she doesn't know who she really is anymore. She's been pretending for so long, and though it's obvious to a reader (and viewer) that she clearly has a heart and cares, Satsuki is so used to pushing her feelings away that she's at a loss for how to react to this actual, real, non-dream tragedy:

"Satsuki becomes very aware of how they are all looking at her and her hand still clasped in her sister's and she becomes even more aware of how they are all expecting something from her.

But Satsuki does not know what."

So, Satsuki does a mix of "pretending" and not-she yells at Ryuko like she would have back at the beginning of the series, only to break down. She reminisces about how she had always tried so hard to not let her real emotions show; she thinks back to when she first met Shiro after her father's death (because Soroi saw how devastated Satsuki was and wanted her to have a friend to play with), and she thinks about how she fought to hold back her feelings even when no one was watching.

Ultimately, the story is (obviously) a tragedy that aims to explore the "heavier" aspects of Satsuki's role and what playing that kind of role can do to a person. Satsuki can finally stop pretending, but it's hard to do after she's been pretending for so long… and more than that, she's too late to stop pretending for the one person she was pretending for all along.

Something He Always Was - Ryu, Sen, Sats

Something He Always Was

There's another story that Ryuko's mother told.

(And Ryuko doesn't give a shit about what her dad says. Her mom sure as hell ain't the woman who just offed herself. Never was, never will be.)

"It's better to tell this one on New Year's," Ryuko says, "or when it's snowing, but I guess we don't see much snow 'round here…"

Senketsu is silent, smiling, looking her way. The rain won't stop pounding down on them, and Ryuko is so soaked to the skin by now that she can't even say she really feels wet anymore.

Still. "Maybe freezing rain is close enough," she figures, with a shrug, sitting down next to Senketsu. He's still up against the brick wall, and Ryuko wraps his arm around her shoulder, leaning into his chest.

(And no, she's not shaking when she does this. Senketsu can shut his mouth.)

It doesn't even take a second for Ryuko to feel Senketsu's Displeasure. Not a word comes outta him-not a word *has* to-and somehow, Ryuko finds it in her to laugh at him. (*Laugh*, not cry.) She takes hold of his hand that drapes lazily over her shoulder, running her fingers across the metal skin, the manufactured knuckles.

"You *told* me I gotta take a break, 'member?" she asks. "C'mon. Just one story. Let me have this."

Senketsu says nothing. Ryuko smiles. He reeks like singed wires.

"You'll love this one, you big baby," she says, even though she knows no one really exactly *loves* the story of *The Little Match Girl*, and with Senketsu's hand still in hers, Ryuko goes far back into her memories, trying to recall the tale the best she can.

"But I can't tell it like my mom did," Ryuko warns. "She put all this special emphasis in certain places, always actin' like some little fairytale was the most meaningful thing ever."

She pauses, as though waiting for a reaction, but Senketsu is quiet. "You… could really, like, *see* the freezing little girl, when my mom told this thing," Ryuko says, regardless. "Mom read from this storybook of mine, but you would think she was just… tellin' it outta herself. She was that good at this stuff."

Senketsu keeps on smiling. Ryuko looks away, drawing her hand apart from his. She swallows hard, watches the rain a moment. It's not letting up even a bit, hitting her and Senketsu and the ground like there's no tomorrow, crashing into the garbage cans beside them with loud, ugly *pitter-patters* .

Senketsu falls into her, just a bit. Ryuko wants to ask him how the hell she's supposed to carry his ass back home, but she doesn't, talking instead about the story she knows he doesn't care about. Her words come fast, and she says, "You see, the thing opened with that freezing little girl, wandering around barefoot across the snowy streets."

(Like me right about now, Ryuko says, grumbling a bit. But Senketsu would say that no, Ryuko, you have shoes on, and besides, it's not snowing. And Ryuko says shut up, but then Senketsu would tell her, more seriously, that the girl in the story was all alone, but you aren't, Ryuko. Ryuko doesn't know what to say to that.)

"And this girl was tryin' ta sell these matches," Ryuko goes on. "Or something. I don't know." She frowns. Water attacks her face. "You don't care. It doesn't matter."

Ryuko falls quiet. Nothing but the sound of rain fills her ears, and though she might say she doesn't really give a shit about it slapping her anymore, she imagines Senketsu trying to protect her from the onslaught with nothing but his hunk-of-junk body, and she slides closer to him, burying her face into his chest.

"Well, you're no umbrella," she jokes, but he doesn't laugh, and Ryuko sighs, shutting her eyes against him. The Little Match Girl might have had matches that were warm and bright and showed her wondrous sights, but Ryuko is sure that no fairytale hero ever experienced anything as warm and comforting as her Senketsu feels. No matter the rain and cold and wet, Senketsu is warm.

"You've always been warm, haven't you?" Ryuko asks nobody. Pressed up against him, Ryuko leaves the present and leaves the rain, her mind tumbling back to the time she had first shown Senketsu the beach, and how warm the sand had been beneath them, and how everyone there had stared at the girl in her yellow bikini running around holding hands with a busted-up robot, and how much she didn't give a damn. Senketsu's false skin held between her fingers had been more warm and comforting than any sand could have been.

He'd refused to go into the water, back then. Said he'd rust. Wouldn't let her teach him how to swim, either.

"You're probably regretting that now, ain't ya?" Ryuko asks. "The way it's raining, it's gonna be flooding before long. I'm gonna have to swim ya home, and I ain't cut out to be some lifeguard."

Senketsu doesn't laugh. (But Ryuko knows he's smiling.) It's not like Ryuko expected anything else.

He wants her to go home and get out of here. He's full of worry, desperation. He's so *Senketsu.*

But Ryuko doesn't care to listen. Not now. "Easy for *you* to say you wanna get outta here when you're leaning up against a cold, slimy

human-er, cyborg," Ryuko tells him. "I don't think I really wanna move right now."

It's like that time you wrapped me up in a blanket when you did all that studyin' for me in the library, Ryuko wants to say. I didn't wanna get up. Was too comfy. You're a bad influence.

But she doesn't say any of that. Ryuko's at the point where she might just be too tired to run her mouth at this loser (and she loves running her mouth at this loser).

So she doesn't speak anymore, and slips completely away from the rain, thinking about that warm croquette dinner where Senketsu didn't say one damn thing about calories the whole time, and that night she fell asleep right beside him, and how warm he felt, how soothing, how loving.

Robots have always been warm, she thinks, she knows, dreaming of being back at home, in his arms, his fingers running through her hair, her heart beating against his chest. Everyone's just always been so caught up in telling her the opposite.

Ryuko wakes to the sound of Senketsu's voice.

He says she needs to get a hold of herself. Says she needs to snap out of it. His words are frantic, cracking, breaking, but Ryuko doesn't want to open her eyes. She doesn't want to leave him. Not now. Not yet.

But she feels his hand on her shoulder. Cold. Desperate.

And he says, "Please come home, Ryuko. Please. Please."

And Ryuko can't refuse.

But when she lets herself come back to reality, there is no robot before her, weeping without tears. There is none of her worry-wart,

whiny, overprotective partner. There is none of his stupid, irritating, worthless smile that never looks right. There is none of his arms wrapping around her, holding her close, tight, as though he'd lose her if he ever let go.

There is only Satsuki Kiryuin, just as filthy as the garbage cans beside them, streaked with mud, her eyes wide, red-rimmed, her hand resting on Ryuko's shoulder.

There is only Satsuki Kiryuin, crying, full of worry, full of love.

And Ryuko can hardly look. She can hardly look at this woman in such a state, can hardly comprehend any of it, but it's enough. Satsuki sees life return to Ryuko and relief floods her face, and her puffy eyes light up, and she smiles, sort of, soft and warm and loving.

"Let's go home, Ryuko," she says, still trying to smile through her tears, fighting to speak through her sobs. "I'll take you home."

But Ryuko can't take any of this. She *won't.*

"No," she says. Her throat is scratchy and sore. The rain still hasn't stopped. Senketsu's warmth is fading away. But she doesn't care.

"Just… get away from us," Ryuko begs. "Please."

Just a little bit longer, she thinks. Just a little bit.

Satsuki pulls away from Ryuko. The relief vanishes just as quickly as it had come, and her expression becomes somber. Sad.

"I'll carry you back, Ryuko," she says. "Please. You can't stay out here. You'll-"

"I'll what?" Ryuko snaps. "Die?" She scoffs. "It'll take more than just a little rainstorm to kill *me*, Kiryuin."

Satsuki does not look her way. Her eyes are focused on the ground, to all the water pooling up around them, to the globs of yellow light from the streetlamps rippling with each raindrop.

"There's nothing you can do anymore, Ryuko. There's nothing *any* of us can do."

"And I bet you're glad, ain't ya, huh, Satsuki Kiryuin?" Ryuko asks, though it's really not a question. (And shit, she is *not* crying again. She's *not* .) "You always hated robots. I bet you're just fucking *over the moon* about another one bein' gone, aren't you?"

Satsuki is quiet. The rain seems louder than ever. Ryuko swallows hard, talks fast, loud, no matter how much it stings. "None of you people ever gave a rat's ass about Senketsu. You always wanted to use him as yer precious little *weapon.* You always just thought of 'im as another one of those *monsters.* So congratu-fuckin'-lations! He's dead!"

Ryuko chokes on her words. She coughs into the night. Satsuki still says nothing. The rain is screaming. The *pitter-patter* against the garbage cans is earsplitting.

Ryuko's never admitted it, until now. Not even in her head. The sick, disgusting truth makes his warmth wound and hurt and ache more than anything ever has in her entire life.

His smile only twists the knife. He won't stop anymore. He won't stop *ever.*

And Ryuko can't hide it, not anymore. Tears run freely down her cheeks. She thinks of Senketsu's warm arms around her, of his hand in hers, of his lips pressed up against her own.

"I bet you're even happier!" Ryuko shouts, gasping, hardly even able to string a sentence together but yelling all the same. "Now you don't have to deal with the freakin' embarrassment! Now you don't have to even *think* about how Senketsu n' me are… were…"

She can't finish. She doesn't have to.

Satsuki shakes her head. She looks to Ryuko, her eyes filled with tears of her own. "You're wrong, Ryuko," she says. "Don't you remember when Senketsu and I came to save you?"

She wipes at her face, unable to keep any sense of composure, spluttering, coughing. Ryuko's never seen Satsuki like this.

Like *any* of this.

"I could not understand what he said, but I felt everything he felt, Ryuko. I felt how much he cared about you. I felt how much he loved you." Satsuki manages another one of her kind-of smiles, so soft and mushy that Ryuko is hardly able to believe that it's her sister who sits before her.

But Ryuko knows she's not dreaming. "I never thought that machines could feel that way, but…" Satsuki shakes her head again. "But he loved you so much, Ryuko."

"And…" Satsuki says, calming, slightly, before Ryuko has the chance to shout or yell or get angry or say anything at all, "and I wanted us all to be family. I never…" Satsuki clenches her fists, looking towards Senketsu's corpse. "I never wanted it to be like this."

The rain seems to calm, and Ryuko is silent. The *pitter-patters* fade, and Ryuko cannot speak.

She *wants* to be mad, of course. She wants to say that Satsuki doesn't know shit about her Senketsu. She wants to say that Satsuki doesn't care, has never cared, will never understand. She wants to say that no one would ever get it.

But every word, every choked-up sound, every cry-it was genuine. Ryuko couldn't deny that it was real.

She pulls away from Senketsu's warmth. She lets his hand fall away from her shoulder, lets herself move away from his chest, from his love.

She stumbles to her feet, looking down at the mess that is Satsuki Kiryuin. "You're such a sap, Kiryuin," she says, as though she isn't crying harder than she has all night, as though her words actually sound comprehensible at all. "You're such a damn *sap* ."

Satsuki comes to her own feet, throwing her arms around her sister without a moment's hesitation, wrapping the girl into a hug that's just as strong and fierce and tight as Ryuko would expect, and Ryuko doesn't pull away. Ryuko lets out all the sobs she'd been holding back, all the pain, all the loneliness, and she says, "You're such a damn sap, Sis. Such a *sap* ."

And Ryuko realizes, as Satsuki holds her close, as Satsuki embraces all her raw, unrestrained emotions, that no one is going to be freezing to death, not here, not tonight.

It's not just robots who are warm.

never had - Satsuki, Ryuko

never had

Satsuki holds her mug close but does not drink a bit more, intent on watching the steam rise.

Ryuko's tea has never been particularly… *pleasant*, but there's always a kind of strength to the brew that Satsuki normally appreciates.

She does now, too. Just… in small doses.

"I suppose I am simply not ready," she confesses, finally. It's the briefest, easiest, most concise way she can think of summing everything up.

But Ryuko puts her own mug down on the table with a heavy *clunk* (and without a coaster), crossing her arms, giving Satsuki a look that's halfway between a smile and a frown.

"Nah, you're just leaving your poor wife all alone and bugging your *very* busy little sister," she says, shaking her head. "Satsuki, what you *really* are is *exhausted.* Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

"Not particularly." Satsuki figures it's at least truthful.

But Ryuko is looking even more done with this whole situation. She sighs a long, drawn-out sigh. "Jesus, you don't need to be such a smartass all the time, do ya?" she asks.

Satsuki doesn't answer that.

Ryuko leans back on the heels of her feet, her arms still crossed. "Look. I'm *just* saying that you don't need any little talks or tea, Sis.

You could use less *awake* right now. What you need is some *sleep* . None of this."

"I need advice," Satsuki insists.

"And what makes ya think *I* know what to tell you? Mako's more than capable of pep talks." Ryuko manages a smile, a real one. "C'mon. It's her schtick."

"I know," Satsuki says. "But there are only so many times that one person can say "Hallelujah," wouldn't you think?"

Ryuko comes forward, just a bit, eyes wide. "That bad, huh?"

Satsuki doesn't answer.

Ryuko sighs again, uncrossing her arms, holding up her mug of tea delicately, in two hands. "Okay, but I still don't get why you think *I* know how to help you. Like, I'm the *last* person you should think of here."

"Because you work with kids," Satsuki says easily.

"Yeah, but I ain't no *mom*," Ryuko says. She sips her tea, unmoved by its intense bitterness. "I just work with the little buggers for a few hours, take off my apron, and come home. It's a lot different."

"I would think a full-time job is a little more than "just a few hours,"" Satsuki argues.

"Still ain't the same thing, Sis." Ryuko places her mug back down on the table. "Ain't no mom," she repeats. "Ain't got no plans for that, not now…"

Satsuki manages a smile of her own, at that. "Oh?" she asks. "Are the two of you thinking of children, Ryuko?" She twists her mug in her hands a bit, frowning now. "Actually, where *is* -"

"Ah ah ah, Satsuki, this talk is about *you*, not me," Ryuko cuts in. Satsuki can tell that Ryuko's fighting to sound composed, but she can't miss the red blush that's come over her sister's cheeks.

" *And*," Ryuko goes on, rather quickly, "you just wanted to talk to *me*, didn't ya? I figured this was something you wanted just between us."

Satsuki sips her own tea. It's as bitter as ever. She tries not to flinch. "Well, to tell the truth, Ryuko," she says, bringing her mug down once more, "the two of you are so-"

"Ah ah ah, don't want to hear it!" Ryuko breaks in.

"But how is-"

"Don't. Wanna. Hear. It!" Ryuko repeats. "Doesn't matter right now. What matters right now are *your* problems, remember?"

Right, Satsuki thinks, feeling the joy of the moment deflate as her stress comes right back (and with a vengeance). *Her* problems.

She looks deep into the dark, swirling mass of tea. Normally, Satsuki finds Ryuko's home and this bitter tea comforting, in an odd sort of way. She loves how mishmashed everything is; she loves the incomprehensible, clashing color choices in all of Ryuko's décor, and loves how the dishes all seem plucked out of about a dozen different sets. The strangely-strong tea only serves to wake her up even more to the illogical incomprehensibility of the place.

Now, though, there is little comfort to be found in the home's oddities and quirks. All it does is remind Satsuki of how much she *wants* some sensibility.

She *needs* it, right about now.

"You still shouldn't be talkin' to me about any of this," Ryuko says. She looks a bit flustered, embarrassed, even, as though anything

she could offer would only make things worse. "But, I guess, you really just gotta ask yourself: why do you want this kid?"

Ryuko finishes her tea and slams the empty mug down on the worn-out table. "And don't you dare say it's just 'cause Mako wants this. That ain't fair to you *or* the kid." She smiles a little. "And I would think you'd know better than to pull any shit like that. Mako wants a *lot* of things. Especially food. You'd both die if you gave in to all her whims."

Satsuki smiles a little herself, sort of. "It's Mako who gives in to *my* whims, Ryuko," she says. "She's too understanding…"

Too *good.* Satsuki still feels like the luckiest woman alive, to be able to call such a beautiful, incomprehensible person her wife.

Ryuko looks at Satsuki seriously, her hands clutching the empty mug on the table. "Yeah, Satsuki, Mako *is* understanding, but…" She pauses. "That don't mean it doesn't hurt. She wants to see you happy."

"I know," Satsuki says. "And I *do* want this, Ryuko. I might even want it more than Mako does."

Ryuko tries-and fails-to hide her surprise.

"Is it that odd?" Satsuki asks.

Ryuko flushes. "I just… never took you as the, well, uh, *loves children* type, you know?"

"I never took *you* that way either, and look where you are now," Satsuki says. "You could be the best mother-"

"This ain't about me!" Ryuko insists. She seems just a smidgen redder than she did a moment before.

Satsuki focuses her gaze on her tea once more. "Right. Of course," she says.

The steam from her hot tea is long gone now-anything left in her mug has probably long gone cold, too. Her hands no longer feel so warm anymore.

But it's comfort enough. "That's exactly why I want this, though," she says. "I don't want any child… to have to go through what I did."

Understanding fills Ryuko's eyes. "You want to be the mom you never had," she says.

"Yes. That's why I had to come to you." Nobody else could understand like Ryuko.

Ryuko leans back once more, pulling her hands away from her emptied mug. "Ah," she says. "Okay. Okay."

She shuts her eyes, drawing in a deep, long breath before looking at Satsuki very intently. "Sis, I can't say I have what it takes to be a good mom, but…" Ryuko looks down, to the tiny, undrinkable remnants of tea left in her mug. "But I hear a lot of stuff. Young moms, new moms-they all feel like they ain't ready. And nobody is probably *ever* ready for this brand-new life to just come waltzing into their lives…"

She smiles a bit, as though laughing at an inside joke. "But all these people are just… they're all just full of this idea that they can't handle it. They think they'd be no good at that whole mom thing. You know."

Satsuki knows.

"But the thing is, Sis… when people love, they make themselves *do stuff* that they didn't think they could." Ryuko grins. "It's pretty freaking amazing, what you can do when you love."

She looks up now, still smiling, focusing fully on Satsuki. "I ain't saying you're guaranteed to be a great mom or nothin'," Ryuko says. "But the fact that you're sittin' here with me, right now, well, that's a pretty damn good start."

Satsuki stares, touched, awed-it's rare to see Ryuko so unabashedly emotional and intimate, and she still smiles Satsuki's way, full of the kind of determination that Satsuki has always admired.

But then Ryuko rises to her feet, stretching her arms out wide, as though she had said nothing important all afternoon. " *But* you have a mom and her name is Sukuyo Mankanshoku and you should go talk to *her*, not me," she says.

Satsuki's grip slips a bit on her own mug. "A mother-in-law is not quite the same, Ryuko," she argues. "Mrs. Mankanshoku might be *your* mother, but-"

"Don't wanna hear it!" Ryuko says. She takes the mug right from Satsuki's hands, slapping it down on the table with a loud, wet *clunk*, ignoring all of Satsuki's insistences that she ought to finish it as she grabs Satsuki by the arm to get her up to her feet.

"Sukuyo Mankanshoku *adores* you and thinks of you as her daughter and you'd *better* get outta this dump and go talk to your mom right now!" Ryuko says. "After you have a nap!"

Ryuko promptly leads Satsuki right to the door, putting her hands on her hips in mock-annoyance, only to smile genuinely before seeing Satsuki off.

"I think you'll be a good mom, Sis," she says. "Both you and Mako."

Satsuki nods her head, looking to the warm, spring day visible from the windows on Ryuko's door. The cherry blossoms are right in bloom, littering the porch with pink and drenching the grass with petals.

"I hope so," Satsuki says.

Ryuko rolls her eyes. "Have you been listenin' to *anything* I've been saying? You *really* think you're not cut out for this?"

"Well, I-"

"Satsuki, you act like *my* mom all the time," Ryuko says.

And Satsuki smiles. She laughs. She laughs hard, full of her nonsensical little sister's words and this nonsensical spring day.

"Now, Ryuko, it isn't *my* fault you still act like you need one," she says.

that's all - Ryuko, OC

that's all

There's a girl who sits by the classroom door, in the second row.

She wears her hair in a single braid that she drapes over her left shoulder and tucks a bright yellow chrysanthemum into the tie. Her perfume smells like roses-so strong that anyone knows when she comes into the room-and the latest fashions always find their way into her wardrobe, somehow, some way.

She smiles a pink-lip-gloss smile whenever she wears something new and the other girls cannot stop their gushing.

She is glamorous and lovely when she has no right to be.

The girl stands out. That is the only reason Ryuko looks her way so often, catching sight of her laughing with all those who surround her desk come lunchtime, idly watching as the girl taps her pencil against the desk when the teacher's lectures become particularly boring, *tap tap, tap tap.*

The yellow against the black is bold and brilliant. Nobody else wears a chrysanthemum.

The girl is pretty, though. Talented. She is always one of the fastest to complete their running courses, her dark hair and yellow chrysanthemum bobbing with her steps. It's mesmerizing.

That's all.

Ryuko stands next to the girl in music class. The girl's voice is so nice that the teacher gives her solos. There is no passion behind the words or the melodies, but Ryuko does not notice then. Nobody does. The teacher beams and the girl beams and Ryuko keeps her own voice down, as though she would destroy the beauty.

Sometimes, Ryuko thinks of telling her father about the girl.

She sits at her bed come nighttime, her fingers resting over the cheap plastic of the provided phone. It is always smooth and cold to the touch.

Ryuko pauses before picking up. She looks to the photograph she keeps of the two of them, resting on her bedside table.

She looks to her frown, to her father's sad eye.

She never calls.

Ryuko puts the photograph face-down, after she imagines her father's disappointment when she tells him, quite proudly, that she was *almost* as fast as the girl that day.

She imagines him saying, "What a shame."

The girl says the same thing, not long after.

Her chrysanthemum falls from her hair as she runs across the playground. The girl's braid shudders with her steps and the flower flutters to the sand where it rests and glows in the sunlight.

Ryuko gathers it when no one else does. She brings it into her hands and offers it back with a nervous smile and a quiet, "You dropped this."

The girl looks to Ryuko. Then she looks to her friends.

Her friends look to Ryuko and the flower clasped in her hands, their mouths turned down in disgust.

Ryuko's knuckles are still red. A boy is still shouting for her. The teachers are probably going to take her away any moment.

The girl looks back to Ryuko and says, "It's ruined now. You can have it."

And she walks away.

Ryuko keeps the chrysanthemum, at first.

She carries it back to her room, spinning it in her hand. It's a fabric flower, the kind you'd get at any craft store, with a stem made of wire and petals of thin linen. She spins and spins the chrysanthemum and thinks of wearing it in her own hair, but never does.

The girl comes to class with a new flower, the next day.

It's jasmine now, stark white against her black hair.

The other girls compliment her. They love the new look.

The girl smiles a pink-lip-gloss smile.

"Thank you," she says. "I would never want to touch my other flower again, that's all."

Her friends laugh with her.

But Ryuko touches the flower.

There is not a bit of sand left on it, and she knows it is not the first time the girl has lost the chrysanthemum to the ground.

She tugs on the false linen petals. She plucks them away. One, two, three, four. They fall to her carpet, to a softness that looks soft but is actually not.

Ryuko throws the flower away, come nighttime, after she thinks of calling her father but never does.

She fills her garbage bin with the discarded chrysanthemum and the face-down photograph.

That's all.

A/N: Written as a response to the Guest suggestion for a "what if" situation where Ryuko has a childhood friend/love interest. While chapter 9, "Programmed Love," might fit that description, here's another try at the idea.

Umi-Kyuuketsuki - Ryuko, ?

Umi-Kyuuketsuki

Ryuko Matoi is born too soon, in a little house by the sea. It's raining then-lightly, faintly, nothing more than a slight summer storm-and a fog covers the windows, making the world outside blurry and indistinct.

Ryuko does not cry, in her first moments of life. Her body is unusually pale, and when her father brings her into his hands, her skin is cold as death, icy to the touch.

She does not open her eyes, not even as her father coos and cries.

He bows his head in grief.

Ryuko's mother holds the girl close. She hums a song her husband has only heard when she is drifting off to sleep, smiling down at her child, her face still slick with sweat and her chest still heaving from labor.

"Please take us outside, by the shore," she says. Her song fades away, and she looks seriously to the man by her side.

He protests.

She does not listen.

The woman stands of her own accord. Her steps are awkward and uncertain. Blood drips down her legs, slipping to the carpet, leaving behind rosy-red stains.

Her husband shouts at her to stop. Tears sting in his eyes.

But the woman continues forward. She pulls open the back door with one hand, hardly breathing, stepping onto their wooden porch with shaking legs, holding her baby tight.

Ryuko does not wake or stir as her mother comes down the creaky steps and stumbles into the still-hot sand. The girl does not seem to notice the rain that falls upon her fresh face and her mother, and she is motionless as the woman lets her bare feet touch the white foam.

The mother gasps at the water, shutting her eyes, letting the waves crash against her ankles. She trembles, breathing in the saltwater air.

Ryuko opens her eyes and cries.

Ryuko Matoi swears she's hated the sea ever since.

She hates the smell of salt, she hates the sound of the waves, she hates the sand that gets stuck in her shoes, she hates the crabs that scuttle along the ground.

But most of all, she hates her mother's longing stares.

"Why don't you just go into the water if you want to go so bad?" she asks her mother one hot, slimy summer day. She's in the midst of eating watermelon, and she spits the seeds to their kitchen floor-her mother always hates when she does so.

Today, her mother does not seem to notice.

Her mother says, "I cannot." She does not elaborate.

Ryuko groans. She spits another seed to the wood. The watermelon no longer tastes so sweet. Their floor is littered with shiny black triangles, glossy with pink.

"You'll understand, someday," Ryuko's mother assures her.

But Ryuko never does.

Ryuko Matoi smells the salt first.

It's not just any salt, either, she knows. It's heavy and muggy-the sea on a hot, humid, horrible day.

She decides not to open her eyes. Ryuko figures she can deal with it later.

But then she feels a tug on her arm, strong, alien, and she snaps wide awake, slamming herself up to her feet.

She does not understand the sight before her, not even when she goes as far back in her memories as she can go.

Ryuko Matoi's mother says the sea is dangerous.

Ryuko always thinks *that* a ridiculous, bullshit idea.

(Her mother does not like that word.)

"Father says the sea gave me life," she argues. "That doesn't seem dangerous at all."

Her mother pauses in combing the girl's hair. She looks to their reflections shining back in the mirror, sighing as she pulls the comb away, placing it on the floor beside them.

Ryuko looks to all her little hairs gathered in the comb's teeth. Caught in all the black and blue are a few stark strands redder than the setting sun over the sea.

Her mother says, "Your father tells you too many stories. The sea is filled with monsters that will gobble you up should you ever fall into their depths."

" *That* sounds more like a story to me," Ryuko says.

But she never does go into the sea, not even once, not even as she swears it calls to her in the night, humming a haunting melody that she can never seem to free from her head.

Ryuko Matoi promptly falls back to the hot sand, her body still aching from the battle she only now has the sense to properly recall.

"Monster," she breathes, staring wide-eyed at what lies before her. "Blood-sucker. Sea fiend. *Umi-kyuuketsuki* ."

The creature is nothing Ryuko has ever seen. Never in all her days by the sea has she even caught a glimpse of it from the corner of her eyes, nor has she seen even a flash of it before it falls back into the waves. It has only ever existed in her mother's wild tales, but her mother's wild tales could not possibly be true.

It is impossible, when all her mother has ever done is lie.

Ryuko Matoi hears a new story every time she asks how her mother and father had met.

(To tell the truth, that is the only reason she keeps asking.)

One tale tells that Ryuko's father was a sailor and her mother nothing more than a farmer's daughter in love with the sea. When they met, all of her mother's dreams could finally come true.

"But father is not a sailor," Ryuko would say.

"He *used* to be," would be her mother's curt reply.

Another tale claims that the two were runaways who found each other in a port town not far from their little house. Ryuko's father

caught her mother crying on a red bridge over a pond filled with koi. They have never been separated since.

It is only when Ryuko's mother goes away that she decides to put an end to the mystery and wondering and ask her father. He is old, then, his face lined with wrinkles and his white beard very nearly brushing the ground. His right eye has been long lost to a fishing accident. He walks stooped over, with a cane.

She says, "I wish to know the truth."

He answers without answering.

Ryuko Matoi repeats the story in her head.

Her mother asks of her father, "Would you still love me, if I were no longer beautiful?"

Her father answers, "What a ridiculous question! I would love you even if you came to resemble an *oni* . "

And so her mother asks, "Would you still love me, if I were no longer human?"

Her father hesitates. "No longer human?" he asks.

It is as though his previous words mean nothing at all.

He does not understand.

Her mother is gone the next morning.

Ryuko Matoi takes the creature in.

It is not a man, and yet it also does not seem to be a monster of the sea. The creature is naked, covered only by bright-blue scales that

glimmer in the bloody light of the dying sun, and it reeks of saltwater and seaweed and ocean-it still has seaweed caught in its red hair.

It has fins where there would be ears on a man and a fish's tail where there should be legs. Its arms are blue and webbed and entirely inhuman.

And yet Ryuko swears that its one eye-gold and yellow and what should surely be the eye of an *oni* -is not a devil's eye at all.

Ryuko Matoi does not leave her home by the sea until she is seventeen years old.

Her father says the world outside is dangerous. He looks at her fiercely, gripping tightly to his cane. Ryuko is only reminded of her mother's silly stories.

"You both have always tried to keep me locked up in here," she says.

She does not say, "Mother finally had enough, and so have I."

Ryuko Matoi and the creature only share a glance for a brief moment. Then, the creature falls back to the sea foam, turning away from the girl before it.

"Wait!" Ryuko says, though she does not know why she does.

The creature pauses. Ryuko swallows down the strange lump building in her throat.

She asks, "Did you save me?"

The creature does not answer right away, and so the girl adds, "Why?"

With a strange shudder, the creature turns to look Ryuko's way. It speaks without opening its mouth, without sound.

"I do not know," it says. The voice is deep and soothing-as calming as Ryuko knows the sea *ought* to be-and the sound rings in her head, as though the creature is connected with her very mind.

It says, "I was asleep, but then I tasted your blood, and I awoke."

For the first time, Ryuko notices the makeshift bandage that the creature had been fixing when she had woken up. It is composed of bits torn from her own clothes, wrapped haphazardly around her arm, two bright, red circles blossoming against the blue fabric.

Ryuko starts at the sight. She does not quite remember the sword that had struck her, but she is well aware that it could not have created such a wound.

She comes to her feet, reaching out for her knife that she keeps tucked away in a pouch by her belt.

It's gone.

That does not stop her.

"You bit me," she says to the creature, motioning to her arm, where blood continues to spill in a pattern that is all too fitting with the creature's great fangs. "My mother's stories were right. You're going to gather the others. You're going to devour me. You were never helping me at all!"

Ryuko spits to the sand, stepping close to the creature that does not look her way and does not try to flee.

"You shit," she says.

The creature is silent.

Ryuko continues, "I won't let you stop me now. I've gotten this far. I'll stop all of you!"

The creature laughs-or Ryuko would figure that is what it does, because it shakes a little, and her head is filled with a light, airy tinkling resembling a song.

"You could not even swim," the creature points out. "How would you be able to stop me?"

It is now Ryuko's turn to be silent.

But the creature soon confesses, "I could not think, when I awoke. I still cannot think. I do not know who I am, or where I must go, or what I have been doing."

The creature looks to the sand. "I do not even *know* if there are others."

"That's no excuse for biting me," Ryuko says.

The creature nods its head, as though ashamed. "I know. When I came to my senses, I knew I had to help you."

It looks up towards Ryuko now, staring at her with its one eye. "I can *still* help you. I can help you fight."

Ryuko crosses her arms, unbelieving.

"You can't do much out of the sea," she says. She looks to his fins, taking in his saltwater stench. "There is no way you could help me with anything."

She does not ask how he knew she was fighting.

The creature smiles. Its fangs are sharp and Ryuko knows that they ought to be frightening, but she finds something about the gesture humorous-or perhaps sweet, or charming.

He says, "I may not know much, but I know that I have the power to fight within me, if you would be willing to take it."

Ryuko does not ask why he would want to help her. She does not wonder why she finds herself thinking almost fondly of a sea monster, or why she thinks she ought to trust such a thing.

The creature holds out a webbed hand towards her. When Ryuko takes it, she feels a great power come over her-the kind she has only heard about in her mother's stories.

She says, "You're coming with me, Senketsu."

A/N: Written for Mer-May, though it's a bit belated now…

leftovers - Ryuko, Senketsu, Aikuro

leftovers

Ryuko would be the one to turn on the lights, soon enough, but she hesitates. She comes before the dark room, she places her hand on the cold, metal doorframe, and she hesitates, staring blankly at the space before her.

She can't make out much. Only vague, shadowed shapes meet her eyes. Even the over-bright, hard-white glow of the hallway illuminates little. A bookshelf, here, there. An oversized monitor on a desk. A large sitting chair.

But even the darkness can't keep one word from filling Ryuko's mind.

Ordinary.

The place is nothing but ordinary, and it's a pristine, perfect picture of it. Ryuko needs no lights to know that this space is bland and nondescript, so much so that she could easily imagine it splashed across the glossy pages of a clothing catalog from twenty years ago, handsome models in fine tailored suits standing before the desk and bookshelves pretending to be businessmen.

The artificiality of the room is nauseating.

Perhaps Mikisugi agrees with her. He's as still as he was when he first opened the door, peering into the room without a word, all his boisterousness and excited anecdotes of only moments before long gone and replaced with this uncomfortable silence. He runs a hand through his hair, still clad in a lab coat and little else (though Ryuko is grateful he at least has the decency for *that* much), an overdramatic, acted sigh leaving his lips.

Ryuko is sure that a part of him would love more than anything to tell another great story for this part of the tour. Grand tales of heroism and valiant accounts of victory even in the hardest of times are Mikisugi's favorites-and never has Ryuko known that more than she does now, here, where every door along this hallway and every strange mark upon the tiled floor was seemingly part of some wild, absurd event that gave Mikisugi every opportunity to regale her with all the incredible, unbelievable details of his life's work and passion.

Never had he backed down from that opportunity, either.

Until now.

This room is different. Small. Sad.

(Ryuko doesn't want to think *pitiful* .)

Mikisugi gawks and stares a moment more, as though struggling to come up with words to speak.

In the end, he doesn't come up with much.

"He'd… spend a lot of time, here," he eventually manages. There is the same seriousness to him now as there had been hours ago, when he had told of a woman whose name Ryuko can't keep from her mind.

Even now she thinks it. *Kinue Kinagase.*

Mikisugi tries to elaborate. "Your dad, well… he didn't tend to go home too many nights. Dr. Matoi was… always working. Always kept busy in this room."

Ryuko says nothing. She looks ahead unblinking, all the more aware of her hand clenching up on the doorframe and the disgusting typicality of everything.

The words feel unnecessary. They are unsurprising, as grossly ordinary as this room.

But her mouth still tastes bitter. Her eyes sting.

"I thought you deserved to see it," Mikisugi says. "That you should."

I don't think I should have anything to do with it, Ryuko thinks. She could have lived her whole life without seeing this place and would have lost nothing. The room could have been brushed over, ignored, an omission from this tour and a concealed detail of Isshin Matoi's life to add to all the other details that Mikisugi refused to tell the man's very own daughter.

Maybe that's the only reason Ryuko utters words of thanks, nodding her head. Mikisugi isn't stringing her along right now, not even a little bit, and he tells her a sincere *you're welcome* before silence falls over the three of them once more.

No one dares try stepping into the room. No one even dares turn on the lights. There's a palpable tension surrounding them, heavy and uncomfortable, and Ryuko's fingers are damp with perspiration, slipping down the doorframe she hasn't stopped holding them against just low enough for her to notice.

She pulls her hand away, her eyes still taking the space in, her head spinning.

"I'll stay here tonight," she says.

Mikisugi looks her way, but she doesn't look back.

"Here?" he repeats.

"Here," Ryuko insists.

She still doesn't turn to Mikisugi, but she can imagine his reaction: his white lab coat peeling away, his body lighting up unnaturally with bright, neon colors-in places where it really, *really* shouldn't-his mouth spluttering out the kind of disgusting, over-the-top bullshit of a man who takes some kind of perverse pleasure in pissing people off.

You sure *you wouldn't want to stay with me?* Ryuko thinks-Ryuko's *sure* -he'll say.

She already has a million answers prepared for him, and not a single one is pleasant.

But Mikisugi's (minimal) clothes stay on. His lab coat remains firmly on his shoulders, and he looks to Ryuko seriously, his eyes hard, brows set solemnly, mouth set in a straight, somber line.

"There's room a little further on that you could sleep in," he says. "It's not the most comfortable place in the world, but there would at least be a futon for you." He pauses, surely examining Ryuko's face for some sort of emotion, but Ryuko doesn't return his gaze or show anything.

"You deserve a good night's rest," he finishes.

Ryuko scoffs. "Well, I sure as hell ain't gonna get *that* any time soon."

"Maybe so, but-"

"I'll be fine," Ryuko holds. She looks down to Senketsu, quiet against her, though she knows he's monitoring the situation carefully, as he always does.

" *We'll* be fine," she says.

Mikisugi gives in. He sighs, less dramatically than before, almost as though it's real. "Like father, like daughter, huh?" he asks.

The light tone of his voice and half-smile on his lips turns Ryuko's stomach, but Mikisugi adds, "Take care of yourself, okay?" and it's very genuine, and she doesn't quite have the time to react to his words before he's walking back down the hall again, the heavy *clunk* of his boots fading quickly to a faint *click* that then vanishes into nothing.

Ryuko sighs herself at his exit, half-relieved Mikisugi had gone and half-anxious about what to do now.

I don't think I should have anything to do with this place, she thinks once more, but she moves her hand to the slick, cool plastic of the light switch panel regardless, flipping the switch to *on.*

The old, mounted squares of fluorescent lights on the ceiling flicker on slowly, stuttering, flooding the space before them with an artificial brightness. Ryuko blinks her eyes at the intensity, knowing without looking that Senketsu is doing the same. His body shifts uncomfortably against her, and she holds a hand over him as though her touch could truly bring comfort.

It's okay, she thinks, though she is not sure she believes it herself.

She tries very hard to ignore her heartbeat racing against her palm.

A few more blinks of her eyes, and Ryuko can see everything clearly, drenched in light. The space is definitely ordinary, but in the light, it also seems old to her, ancient, even, just as her father had always seemed in life, in all his looks and tastes and everything that ever spilled from a mouth half-concealed by the unkempt gray of his beard.

Computer monitors have no business being tanks of plastic anymore, jutting out a length large enough to place an entire meal on top of and then some. The big chair before her, a blanket folded neatly across it, could be half a century old with all the wear on its wooden armrests and its dated, kitschy striped print of horrific orange and green.

Still, the old, boring look of the place doesn't turn Ryuko away from it. She takes a step inside, she shuts the door behind her, she's motionless as the loud *slam* of the heavy metal echoes all around the space and leaves them trapped inside.

At least, she certainly *feels* trapped. A closed door and a single foot inside is all Ryuko needs to feel absolutely suffocated by the place, and she is not even the slightest bit silent about her discontent.

"It *reeks* in here," she immediately finds it in her to complain. "It's like someone's tryin' ta hide a rotting corpse with all this fuckin' Citrus Magic everywhere."

"Citrus Magic?" Senketsu asks. They're the first words he's spoken in what feels like an eternity, and Ryuko has to admit to herself that she would have sooner expected a lecture of some kind from him than any sort of curiosity about gross human smells.

But she prefers the curiosity, she thinks.

"Air freshener," she tells him. "The kind that *wants* to smell like roses and lavender and shit-"

"Isn't it called *Citrus* Magic, Ryuko?"

"That's just a stupid name!" Ryuko snaps. "And names usually don't mean anything, so you can wipe that smug look off your face-"

"Ryuko, you must remember that I don't *have* a face-"

"But you *can* smell this shit, can't you?" Ryuko crosses her arms over him, her eyebrows furrowed and an angry pout upon her lips.

Maybe the real bad idea here was bringing *him* along. His smartass attitude is the absolute *last* thing she needs, and even his very presence weighs down upon her. She feels him every second-every breath, every small shudder of fabric-and each movement tells her, silently, that he would never leave her side.

Senketsu wouldn't even sleep against her if she's not, not even for an instance-and not even if she wanted him to.

And she wants him to now. She wishes he wouldn't speak. She wishes to hear him snore and feel him calm, drifting away.

But he won't, and she knows he won't, and so she elaborates for him, sighing a sigh that may rival Mikisugi's for most dramatic. "It just smells like the nastiest perfume in here," she says, and she quiets as she continues, "Like walking down the laundry detergent aisle. Nothin' 'natural' about it."

She uncrosses arms, letting them fall down by her sides. "Nothin' like the stuff Mrs. Mankanshoku makes."

Senketsu quiets, too. "I see," he says, and he says nothing more as Ryuko stands very still, examining this space further.

Ryuko would sooner expect the horrible stench of the place from some super manufactured and brightly colored plastic bottle than an entire *room*, but she can't deny what the smell means: someone had clearly been maintaining this place.

Cleaning it. Spraying it down.

And she can't even begin to fathom who would bother. Or *why.*

The odd cleanliness is even more obvious with the lack of dust. Not a speck can be found on any surface-not the desk with the oversized monitor and keyboard, not the three bookcases with their wooden boards sagging and warped from the weight of too many too-big volumes and manuals that line the shelves, not the large mirror on the wall with its tacky yellow frame, not the smaller mirrors propped up against books that Ryuko would never read, their titles hidden behind the wood and glass.

There's not even a bit of dust on the old photograph at her father's desk, Ryuko finds, coming close. No dirt muddies the glass of the frame, no grime. The image shines clearly through: Ryuko and her father, standing side by side, their eyes to the ground, their faces devoid of passion and joy and anything besides disappointment and the desire to be as far away from the camera as possible.

Ryuko takes a deep breath.

That's right, she thinks. She's seen this damn thing before.

The photo is the exact same as the one her father had kept at home, perched on his living room table and hanging in his office. It has to be the only picture he has of them together.

Hell, it has to be the only picture he even has of *her.*

Ryuko stares a long time. She considers pulling the image towards Senketsu, holding it up beside him and explaining, for the first time in her life, everything the picture doesn't say.

But the shine on the glass in the frame, nearly blinding with the brightness of the lights above them, and that stupid ornate wood instead of cheap plastic, and her father's stupid face….

She puts the frame facedown against the desk with a groan.

It's not like it's too late to back out of this. Most everyone still has to be up and about. Mako is probably wondering where she's gone off to, and Ryuko can imagine that girl's ever-present smile falling as Mikisugi tells her the news, and it's not a nice thing to imagine, and a part of Ryuko would love to run from this room and embrace her. The thought of sleeping beside Mako and dreaming in the midst of her snores sounds more and more appealing.

After all, deciding to stay the night in your dead father's old office is just kind of messed up.

Senketsu agrees with her.

"You know you'll never be able to sleep on that terrible chair, Ryuko," he says.

Ryuko could almost smile. *Here's* the lecture she's been anticipating ever since she first came before this nasty, abandoned room.

"Weren't you listening?" she asks, even knowing full well that he had been. "I won't be able to sleep 'cause of all this fuckin' *crap* we just

heard! I could sleep in a goddamn garbage dump and that'd be just as good as anywhere else."

The chair is *hardly* the worst of Ryuko's problems, and as if to demonstrate, she steps away from the desk, falling upon her intended "bed," collapsing on its hard cushion sideways and dangling her legs over the stiff wooden armrest. It's all just as uncomfortable as the chair her dad used to keep in his home office, but that chair was different, too, more of a place of rest, because she had been small in that chair, tiny enough to lay her whole self across the hard cushion and still have room to wiggle her toes.

But then, her times in that office are only faint, vague memories stuffed far away in her head. It's fuzzy-her father working his boring work, her in that chair, just barely in his sight, where he would pay her no mind and she'd fall asleep dreaming that he would.

"Fucking hell," Ryuko says now. She runs a hand along Senketsu's collar, fingers coming to his neckerchief where they stay, twisting between the threads-a nervous habit she hasn't acknowledged as one and one she won't for a long time yet. His fabric is warm, and though Ryuko would never quite describe the texture as soft, there's something comforting in the way Senketsu relaxes at her touch.

"Ryuko?" he asks.

She sighs.

"Dad always looked at me like I was just some big *disappointment*, you know?" she says.

Senketsu is silent.

Ryuko swallows. "Like… like…" she tries, "like he just got stuck takin' care of me after Mom died 'cause there was no one else."

Ryuko pulls her hands away from Senketsu. She feels the way he tenses up as soon as her fingers fall to the chair beneath them, and

she feels the way she herself tenses up as her mouth moves without her wanting, her heart speaking as though it has a mind all its own.

"When I was a kid, I thought he was just mad at me for bein' the one to stay alive. If you had to choose between taking care of a kid or keeping your wife, you'd want to keep your wife, right?"

She pauses a moment, lowering her voice. "I was just nasty leftovers to him."

Ryuko would look up to the ceiling now, if it weren't littered with overly bright lights, and so she takes to looking to the too-big monitor instead, just as glossy and perfectly clean as the glass on the picture frame she'd shoved facedown on the desk.

She tries not to think about how Senketsu works to read every beat of her heart, every breath that leaves her lips, every bit of perspiration that builds on her forehead, everything.

She tries not to think about how there's no reason for anyone to hear any of this shit, especially not *Senketsu*, who would run his mouth at her, who would worry himself sick and do anything and everything to make it seem that he could provide her with a hand to hold, or a body she could collapse into the folds of, as though he wasn't already all that and more to her.

But she thinks about it all anyway, and she keeps running her own mouth anyway, saying words and feelings she's never once expressed before, no matter how selfish she tells herself it is.

"He even used to go on about how much I *looked* like her, you know that?" she says. "He didn't ever want *me* .He just wanted her back. And now…."

Her fingers find Senketsu's neckerchief again. She holds it-him-close, tight, and this time, she doesn't feel him relax beneath her touch.

"And now he wants me to save the fucking world?" It sounds even more ridiculous, once she puts it into words. Ryuko could laugh, maybe, if she weren't sitting here, on her father's old sitting chair, stuck in this hellish reality.

Her fingers clench tightly around Senketsu, but she pulls her hand away completely in only a moment, when she realizes she had to have hurt him.

(She doesn't want to think *just as she always does*, but still the thought comes over her.)

"Now he wants *us* to save the fucking world," Ryuko amends herself. "What kind of hell logic is that? What the fuck was he thinking?"

She feels hot. The bright lights aren't only obnoxious anymore-they're dizzying, and she could just about empty her stomach right here and now. She doesn't know anything about her father, or anything about anything, and she has never felt it more than she has now, here, in this place.

Ryuko only manages to steady herself when Senketsu keeps her from tumbling out of her seat-their seat-and when he does so, groaning, lifting her and placing her gently back down, she finally meets his gaze, and she thinks, *Well, I* do *know nothing, except-*

Senketsu interrupts her thoughts.

"Ryuko…" he manages, barely. He seems to struggle to breathe, shuddering against her, but still he tells her, "You should rest. You're still recovering from our fight with Satsuki earlier."

Ryuko doesn't hesitate to argue.

"I am *not*," she grinds out. She shifts positions, sitting upright, planting her feet firmly on the cold, tiled floor with an over-loud *thunk* of her sneakers.

"Damn it, Senketsu! Could you *not* lie to me right now?"

It doesn't matter if it's just for her own good or whatever the hell else he would say it's for. She doesn't care that he only wants her to take it easy and *not* fall off of kitschy old chairs. There's no way she's just going to shut her mouth and close her eyes and act like nothing had ever happened.

Senketsu bristles beneath her. "Ryuko," he tries, "I-"

"I know, I know, okay?!"

Ryuko folds in on herself, placing sneakered feet on the cushion, bringing her legs close, up to her chest. She holds them there, burying her face into her knees, where there is no Senketsu and only her.

"You're great, Senketsu," she says, her voice muffled, words shaky. "You always look out for me, and… and…."

And, what? Ryuko shuts her eyes against herself, blocking out the bright lights and Senketsu's stares.

"And it's no wonder that Dad died for you," she manages. "Died *making* you."

Ryuko brings her head up, opening her eyes once more to the brightness, gazing once more at this dizzying, sickening place. "Dad spent all those late nights here, just for you. You're… perfect. Everything I'm not."

She stretches her legs out again, shifting once more on the chair, letting knees and calves and ankles dangle over the cold, hard wood of the armrest, her sneakers bobbing slightly. "And dads don't want daughters, anyway!" she says. "They're always waitin' on that son. I guess mydad just got sick of waitin' and made one his damn self!"

For a moment, the only sound is the buzzing of the lights above.

"It's not like I blame 'im."

How could she, Ryuko knows, sitting here, stuffed full of the knowledge that she was the only daughter her father had and she'd ended up as nothing more than a mess of a person?

Even if it *was* his own damn fault…

Senketsu squeezes Ryuko's hand through his glove, fabric tightening against her knuckles and clutching at her wrist. It's a desperate gesture, almost frantic-what Senketsu always does when he's upset and his words aren't enough.

Ryuko isn't entirely sure he's even aware of his grip around her and his warmth seeping into her own. She's not sure he's ever aware of it.

He says, "Dr. Matoi is not my father, Ryuko." His tone is nonchalant and breezy and as light as a joke.

"And besides," he adds, nervousness seeping into his voice, "who says I'm a man?"

Senketsu's hold on Ryuko's hand loosens, just slightly. It's more than enough for Ryuko to feel the color drain from her face.

"Senketsu…" she says, "have I… been thinking of you wrong this whole time?"

She cannot look his way. "Have I always been hurting you?"

Ryuko only barely keeps herself from adding, *More than I already know I hurt you?*

But perhaps Senketsu knows what she feels anyway- *of course* he knows-and he speaks her name very quietly and very gently, just as he always does whenever she says something that rattles him to the core.

"No…" he tells her. "I… like it very much when you refer to me as *he* . You do not hurt me."

Relief washes over Ryuko. "Really?" she asks.

"Yes," Senketsu says.

Ryuko manages something of a smile. She brushes at her eye with the palm of her hand. "I'm sorry, Sen," she tells him. "I guess I just… with your voice n' all…."

"It's okay," Senketsu assures her. He pauses, almost hesitant as he continues, "It's… sweet. You think of me in human terms, even when I am-"

Ryuko sits up. Her head spins from the sudden movement, but she doesn't care about any of that, gazing down at Senketsu as intensely as she can muster.

"You know you're nothing like that shit they were spoutin'."

"But I am not like you, either, Ryuko," Senketsu says, very matter-of-fact. "I am not human."

Ryuko rises to her feet.

"And who gives a *damn* about that?!"

No one speaks. Ryuko looks to the etched-in lines on the tiled floor. Her bangs cover her eyes, the red strands of her hair seeming brighter than even the lights in the room.

Then, much more quietly, she tells him, "Even if you're not human, you're a *person*, Senketsu. And people deserve respect."

She avoids his gaze. "It wasn't right of me to just assume things about you. Just 'cause you sound like that doesn't mean anything."

"Ryuko…."

"I mean it, Senketsu!"

Ryuko falls back down on the chair. The cushion feels harder than it did only moments before, and the stench of this room only seems to grow worse with every minute more she stays.

"You can't keep letting people walk all over you," she says. "You can't keep letting people dis you and treat you like you're nothing."

She looks to her feet. " *Especially* if it's me."

Senketsu is quiet-overthinking her words, no doubt. Analyzing her.

He's always most concerned about *her.*

"You should calm down, Ryuko," he eventually manages. "It is kind of you to get worked up for my sake, but getting worked up is not good for your-"

Ryuko will not hear it.

"Maybe I wouldn't get so worked up for your sake if *you* got worked up for your *own* sake!"

Senketsu sighs, deep and heavy. Ryuko's sure he's tired of this whole thing-and he wants her to be tired of it, too, no matter how much she's determined *not* to be.

He speaks before she has the chance to say anything more.

"There is no need for *anyone* to get worked up," he says, acting as if all his words are the most logical, reasonable things on the planet. "You do not hurt me with your human terms."

If Senketsu did have a human face, Ryuko imagines he would smile very wide. "Though, it *is* rather curious, don't you think? If it's true that I was created from your DNA…"

Ryuko cannot help but shudder at the thought.

"… then shouldn't I sound just like you?" He pauses, humming to himself. "And I suppose I would be a *she*, if that were the case…"

Ryuko could scream. She nearly does.

"Damn it, Senketsu!" she cries. She digs her nails into the cushion below them, the rough fabric very nearly ripping. "This is exactly what I'm talking about! It doesn't matter what the hell you sound like!"

(She doesn't say, *And thank God you don't sound like* me.)

"It doesn't even matter what you *look* like!"

(She doesn't say, *And thank God you don't look like* me.)

"All that matters is that you're a person and you deserve to be referred to how you wanna be referred to!"

Ryuko falls back into the hard back cushion of the seat, letting her body splay sloppily across the chair. The bright lights rain down on her, and she shuts her eyes, and she swears a few times before she can come up with anything actually comprehensible to say.

"And just 'cause you have some of my DNA doesn't mean you're some exact copy of me or nothin'. You're your *own* person."

Senketsu manages a laugh, at this.

"I suppose that is true," he says. "Good thing, too. If I were anything like you, you would be long dead by now with that reckless attitude of yours."

"Hey!"

Ryuko snaps her eyes open and sits a bit more properly, staring Senketsu down as though her death glare could really wipe that smug look off his face. "I'll have you know that I got by *just* fine for *years* without your annoying ass! In fact, I got by for years without

anybody's annoying ass! I didn't need nobody! I could kick anyone's…."

Senketsu no longer seems so smug. Ryuko looks to the ugly, kitschy print. She coughs, her face heating up. "But that's the past. I'm glad you're here now, Senketsu."

Her fingers find the fabric of the chair once more, and once more her nails find themselves digging into it.

"But I'd be even *more* glad if you had some damn self-respect!"

Senketsu gasps, as though offended.

"I'll have you know that I have plenty of self-respect, thank you very much," he tells her. "And instead of wasting your time thinking that I don't, you really ought to spend more time worrying over yourself, Ryuko. All those greasy croquettes-"

"Goddamn it, Senketsu!"

Ryuko's sure she must have torn into the stuffing of this chair by now. She looks to white tiles beneath her, and her white sneakers resting just above. The shoes are dull and brown against the perfection of the glossy floor, specked with mud and dirt-and blood, too, she's sure. She loses so much blood.

Senketsu's even more aware of that than she is.

He sighs, very deep, very sorrowfully.

"Ryuko," he says, resigned, as though admitting defeat, "I… remember your father now."

Ryuko uncurls her hands to find that the fabric hasn't ripped at all. She feels her eyes widen, and she looks away from the tile to instead stare at the person against her.

"You got your memory back?!" she asks. "And you didn't tell me 'til *now* ?!"

Senketsu turns his eye away from her, towards the too-big computer monitor and facedown photograph.

"It only came to me hours ago," he explains. "And you were already so riled up. I could not say anything-"

"So you've just been givin' me stupid lectures and pissin' me off-"

"Yes," Senketsu cuts in, shutting his eye. "I have done nothing helpful for you."

Ryuko lets herself relax-just slightly. At least he's not stringing her along for his own amusement.

"Well," she says, trying very hard to sound calm no matter her heart racing inside, "I'll forgive you if you tell me everything you know right now."

She lowers her voice. "Did Dad…."

She can't finish.

But Senketsu understands.

"Yes," he tells her. "Before he put me to sleep, your father told me about you."

And someday, on another day, when they are alone together and she is exhausted and he feels it and he holds her and she holds him, Senketsu would say that he remembers the old man's voice. He would describe it as tired, though somehow youthful still, free of the gravelly tone that Ryuko has spoken of and that should have been there, having come with age.

Senketsu would go into detail about the man's bandaged hands, and how gently they had brushed across him. He would recall the stench

of the man, like flowery fabric softener and dated cologne, and he'd speak of how sad the man had looked, holding his creation in his hands.

But in that room, in that space, he does not say any of that.

He says, "Your father told me that if I ever hurt you, and if I ever brought you any harm… he'd find a way to come back from the grave and destroy me himself. He told me to protect you. He told me that's why I was born."

Senketsu pauses. "No, why I was *made* ."

Ryuko can't pretend to be calm or relaxed anymore. She shakes her head, she pushes her hands back into the cushion beneath her, she curls her fingers and digs her nails into the kitschy print just as she feels she's been doing since they first got here.

Maybe Senketsu was right. She should rest. She should sleep. None of this makes any sense. It's all wrong. It's all ugly. It's all *lies.*

"Are you just… messin' with me?" she asks. She tries at laughing. It sounds as strained and horrible as the sinking feeling deep in her gut. "Even though I told ya *not* to lie to me?"

Senketsu tenses up with her. He squeezes her hand.

"I'm not *lying*, Ryuko," he says. There's panic and alarm and stress and anxiety in every syllable that comes out of his mouth. He can't hide any of it from her, all his feelings leaking out of every thread, every Fiber, every last inch of him.

And it's all her fault.

But she doesn't stop.

"You have to be lying!" she cries. "Dad would *never* say-"

Senketsu releases her hand.

"Weren't you listening, Ryuko?!" he asks, shouting, louder than Ryuko has ever heard him. "Mikisugi told you himself! Your dad did *everything* to protect you!"

"And I didn't believe it then, either! Mikisugi would lie to me until he turned as fucking blue as his hair, but *you*, Senketsu-"

"Ryuko, why would I *ever* lie to you about something like this?"

Senketsu is not shouting anymore. He's quiet, almost whispering. His voice is choked up, fragile. He could break like a porcelain doll. He could shatter.

She did *not* make him cry again. She didn't. She *can't.*

She also can't speak.

Senketsu says, "Ryuko, your father didn't even *want* me. He *needed* me. He needed *something* to protect you. And I'm sure, if he'd had the choice, he never would have picked something like *me* . I… hurt you, Ryuko. If I had just been a combat uniform, or a suit of armor-I would have never hurt you."

A lump builds in Ryuko's throat, so big that it can't be swallowed down, but she tries anyway, swallowing hard, shaking her head, the dizzying sensation returning to her, falling all over her, making the possibility of collapsing face first to the cold tiled floor more and more plausible.

"You, hurt *me* ?" she repeats. It's a stupid notion. Bullshit. Ridiculous. Nonsense. He has no *right* to say anything like that, not now, not after everything *she'd* done.

But he says yes. He says it desperately, pleadingly.

"Your father would be disappointed in me, Ryuko," he tells her. "He would tear me apart if he could. He didn't want a new child when he

made me. He just wanted something for *you.* I exist only for you, Ryuko."

Ryuko shakes her head.

"Shut up!" she says. She repeats the words in her mind. *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* "Who gives a *damn* what my father says or wants or thinks of you, huh?! You don't exist for me, Senketsu. You're your own damn person! Remember? I thought you knew that!"

Senketsu manages a chuckle. It sounds more choked up than anything. A broken-doll sound. A shattered-glass sound.

"And what kind of person am I, really?" he asks.

And someday, on another day, after he'd sat by her bedside and had dreams filled with her voice, he'd tell her of the fluttery feeling that comes over him every time she looks his way and says *kare* and every time he knows that she thinks of him as *him* instead of *it* or *thing* . He'd voice his wonderings if it would be a better feeling if she said *kanojo,* and she called him *she,* or maybe *anohito*, *that person*, and they'd try, together. He'd speak with her, and he'd laugh with her, and he'd say, only half joking, that if he could assume the shape of a human being, and could shift himself and everything within him into something that could love her in the way she deserved, that he'd wish to be as beautiful as Satsuki Kiryuin, because he could never be as beautiful as Ryuko Matoi.

It would take Ryuko a very long while to begrudgingly admit that Satsuki *is* very pretty, but Senketsu never does ask Ryuko-not in that room, not on a war ship that sails into the night, and not directly, anyway-if it's bad to wish to look-just a bit!-like the one you love most of all in the whole wide world.

When they are that room, Senketsu speaks softly, feebly, in that porcelain-doll-pieces, glass-shards voice.

He says, "If I'm a person, I'm a person who shouldn't be a person and who doesn't know how to be a person."

Ryuko tugs on his neckerchief again-not out of nerves, not out of anger-and she tells him, "Do you think *anybody* knows how to be a person? I don't! Nobody does! And quit actin' like what my dad wanted or thought or whatever the hell else about you mattered! He didn't get to know you! And even if he did, and he still wanted to tear you apart or whatever bullshit, fuck him! Fuck him all the way to hell!"

She catches her breath. She's more pumped up than she has been all night. He's staring at her wide-eyed, the kind of look he gives when she says something particularly sappy.

Ryuko doesn't let that stop her.

"You're fucking *great*, Senketsu," she says. "Fuck my dad. He didn't know shit."

If Senketsu could smile a sassy, cocky smile, Ryuko is sure he would.

"But he knew enough about *you* to know that you're a disappointment and failure, Ryuko?" he asks, all cheeky, invisible clothing grins.

He doesn't need to say any more. They laugh, together, and together they stay, all night, out of that dizzying room, out of that mess of too many books and too-big monitors and facedown photographs, in the darkened hallway, curled up on the cool, tiled floor that feels so much warmer when you're with someone.

A/N: Written as a response to the prompt, "Ryuko puzzles over how Senketsu sounds male to her/Senketsu puzzles over how he sounds male to Ryuko. After all, wouldn't a cloth-alien made with DNA from Ryuko's nervous system sound female, like her?" Prompt suggested by argentdandelion.

Though the final piece ultimately has little in common with the prompt-even extended research on gene splicing for the story didn't help me to feel qualified enough to write a more hard-science fic-I did try to maintain the "meat" of the idea. Ryuko assumes Senketsu is a man because of his voice, and she's left embarrassed and ashamed when he brings her impression to question. What if Ryuko had been wrongly thinking of Senketsu as a man this whole time?

In the end, Senketsu can't say he knows his gender identity, which ties loosely into the original prompt: who can say why Senketsu sounds the way he does?

This was admittedly a very difficult piece for a person like me (a cis woman) to write, and I can only hope I handled the topic with the complexity and care it deserves.

A/N 2: This piece was reworked and reposted on January 11, 2018. The original version is available by request.

real life - Ryuko, Senketsu

real life

It sucks being in different Houses, and she's not exactly clever enough to find a way to sneak into the Hufflepuff boys' dorms-and she's not sure she even *wants* to. The way that loser describes it, it sounds like some kitschy, horrible nightmare. Covered in *yellow* .

(Then again, they say that no non-Hufflepuff has gotten in there for a thousand bajillion years. The challenge *is*, admittedly, rather enticing.)

But they find a way. He always seems to know exactly when she's looking for him, and tonight is no different. She can just barely make out his shadow as she makes her way up the wooden steps of the Clock Tower, perched by the window, looking out to the stars. It's a wonder that with those big ears of his he doesn't hear her, but it seems he doesn't, not even looking her way as she makes her way towards him.

"Hey, Fresh Blood," she whispers. Her breath is still coming in gasps. Damn. Is she *really* that out of it? Still? "Hey. Little help?"

He turns towards her with a start. Even in the dim moonlight, she sees how his mouth drops. "Ryuko, what-"

"What do you *think* ?" Ryuko falls to the ground beside Fresh Blood and crosses her arms, fighting the urge to tell him to fuck off. He doesn't need to look at her like that and act all surprised. He always flips out at every little thing like it's the end of the world.

Still…

She hasn't taken a look at herself, but from the way he's reacting, maybe it's pretty bad. Like, Worse-Than-Usual Bad.

Ryuko feels her face redden.

Fresh Blood doesn't say anything more. He shakes his head, his attention shifting to his robes. Always prepared for her, isn't he? He pulls antiseptic and cotton swabs out from his pockets, along with an ice pack he's used magic to keep cool-all those Muggle things.

(Of course, once upon a time he'd tried practicing his healing magic on her, but, well, *that* ended with him panicking out his ears for her and lost Gryffindor 30 points when she had to fess up about the fight. Rather suffer slowly like a Muggle than go through *that* humiliation, Ryuko figures.)

He still does the easy stuff with magic, though. " *Tergeo*," he whispers, and the excess blood vanishes, off Ryuko's robes, and off her skin.

"I don't know why you never bother to do that yourself," he mutters. "Do you *like* looking like you nearly got killed?"

Ryuko shrugs her shoulders as he lights the tip of his wand to examine her face. That's probably where the worst of it is. She can scarcely see out of her right eye, and the whole thing feels warm and bumpy and swelling. He sighs.

"Everyone's going to wonder why you didn't just go to Madam Pomfrey," he says. "There's no way this will heal overnight. You know she won't ask too many question-"

"But she'll *know* !" Ryuko averts her eyes, pouting, looking down to the ground. "Pomfrey'll know and people will suspect and the truth will come out," she says. "I bet those idiots would lose House points just to prove that they beat me and I had to go running to Madam Pomfrey."

"You lost." It's not a question.

"So what if I did?"

"Ryuko…"

"Don't "Ryuko…" me! Look, they were-"

"It doesn't matter *what* they were doing!"

Ryuko closes her mouth, taken aback. She doesn't expect that tone. Fresh Blood's shouting. He never shouts. Especially not about something like this.

"This happens all the time," she says, after a moment. "I don't know why you're getting so messed up about it now."

He looks away from her. "Because I'm *worried*, Ryuko. You can't keep getting yourself beat up like this when you could just… ignore it and move on."

Ryuko is right ready to argue with his ass when he focuses his attention back on the mess that's her face and she thinks better of saying anything. (Well, at least right-now-this-second, anyway. It'd probably be good to *not* have a swollen, nasty, who-knows-what go untreated for too long.)

And so it's without another word from either of them that Fresh Blood works on whatever happened to Ryuko's face. It hurts like hell, but she bites down on her lip to keep from crying out. (He lets her squeeze his hand sometimes, too.)

Fresh Blood moves to clean her other wounds once the face is dealt with, but Ryuko stops him then, pushing his hands away.

"I *can't* just ignore this stuff," she finally says. "What they do. What they say about you, Fresh Blood."

(It's the name *they* call him, but when she says it, it means something different.)

"None of it's fair," she goes on. "They think that just because you look a little different, you shouldn't be allowed-"

"Ryuko." Fresh Blood puts down the antiseptic and stares her right in the eyes. "I don't just "look a little different." I *am* "a little different." And maybe it doesn't matter to you, but-"

"It shouldn't matter to anyone!" She hates this. She can't stand this conversation. She can't even stand to look at him anymore.

Ryuko rises to her feet and goes by the window. The stars are especially bright tonight, as though to laugh at her.

"You're still a good wizard," she says. "Way better than me. You actually study and write your essays. And… I just hear people saying those *things* about you, and I… I'm *scared*, Fresh Blood."

He's standing up now, too. He makes his way over towards her. "Why?" he asks. He looks so sincere.

Shit . Why is he so *good* ?

"Because I'm just so fuckin' selfish," Ryuko admits. She rubs the bite on the back of her neck without thinking about it-a nervous habit she doesn't know that Fresh Blood's picked up on.

"I *look* normal," Ryuko says. "But if people put two-and-two together and figured out the truth about me, they'd say all the same shit about *me* that they do to you." She laughs, uncomfortably. "I tell myself I'm doing this all for you. But I think… I think I'm really just doing it for me. It's not that they're insulting you that matters. It's that they're also insulting *me* ."

Fresh Blood doesn't even hesitate. "You know that's not true," he says, way too gently, way too kindly, way too *nice* . "If you think that, then you don't know yourself like I know you."

"And what the hell do you know about me that I don't?" Ryuko asks. Her face feels even hotter and redder than it did before-and she's sure it's not on account of whatever must be swelling up all over it. "Stop being a cheeseball. This is real life."

Fresh Blood is quiet. He doesn't argue, motioning Ryuko to sit down so he can finish dressing her wounds. She doesn't say a word herself as he wraps the bloody sores in bandages that she'll be sure to keep hidden under her robes come morning, and she doesn't say anything more as he looks away from the bruises and the scrapes and the blood and the antiseptic to focus his full attention on her.

"You're still wrong, you know," he says, finally, gripping Ryuko's tiny, worn-out hands with his own massive, giant ones. "If you really think that you would go through all this pain just for some big show, then I think *you're* the one not living in real life."

Ryuko looks away and pulls her hands away, crossing her arms. "And *you're* an obnoxious…" she starts to say, but Fresh Blood looks at her so damn Seriously that Ryuko can't say she really feels like yelling at him anymore.

She also doesn't really feel like flinching when he takes her hands once more.

(Why the *hell* does she just want to spend the rest of the night up here with him?)

"I am just trying to say, Ryuko," Fresh Blood says, quietly, tenderly, running his fingers nervously over her own, "that you do all this… because you're standing up for me. *That's* the kind of person you are. That's the Ryuko I know."

He looks to the ground, to their hands still together-Ryuko can't really say. "I just hope… that someday, you don't *have* to stand up for me anymore."

"I hope so, too," she says.

A/N: An alternate version of chapter 5, "Anywhere Else." This was the original draft for the piece, but I might actually prefer it to the "final" story!

your sound - Senketsu, Ryuko

your sound

The first time, it's an accident.

He's scared. He doesn't mean to.

The feeling comes what seems too late. It comes after the battle, after reddened cheeks and hasty, labored breaths, after an escape that should have left her a crumpled heap on the ground.

She only barely manages to reach the station just as the last train rings its bells and signals its departure. Everyone backs away at the sight of her-of him, of them-eyes glued to the weapon she keeps at her side and his body pressed against hers, faces filled with a jumble of emotions and feelings that he doesn't understand and can't understand.

But she acts for him. She shouts, she yells, she holds up a blade she can scarcely keep steady, and before long the train is hers. None can say a word as she rides, as she goes somewhere he doesn't know and he is sure she doesn't know herself, her hand-his hand, their hand, he doesn't know that, either-gripping the cool steel stanchion tight, as though her life depends on it.

She still fights to breathe. Every breath is a desperate gasp, and she's hot and burning beneath him, skin on fire, pushing him away with every whimpered wheeze, and yet he holds her close to him, anyway. He holds her as she holds the cold metal, he holds her as she strains to hold herself upright, he holds her and all her blood she's spilled across him and all her sweat that now covers his entirety. He holds her stench of war, he holds her pain, he holds this girl- *Ryuko*, he thinks, as though he hasn't been repeating and repeating the name in his head-like she is all he has.

Perhaps it is because she *is* all he has.

The train stops as the setting sun drenches them in a bright-orange glow that he's never known. She can no longer stand, and he feels her fall, hard, her body collapsing to the ground in a place where the air is thick and heavy and hot and the smell of garbage prevails. He breathes in the reek of rotting food tumbling from tipped-over bins, of rats scurrying around dark corners, of human waste and mold. He feels the sun pressing down on him in a way it shouldn't this time of year-not that he knows what time of year it is-and it suffocates him, leaving him as starving for breath as she had been only moments before.

The people come quickly, a small group of boys. They hear the fall of his girl-no, of Ryuko-and they throw down their playing cards, coming over to gawk, to stare. They're young-nothing more than mere children, schoolbags still slung over their backs, youthful freckles dotting their faces, too-big, hand-me-down clothes falling over their shoulders and held up at their waists with dangling belts-but their words bring him to hold her trembling body even closer to him, his own body tensing, his breath leaving him completely.

The boys look to one another, and look to him, and look to her with eyes that don't see her as human. They lick their lips, they inch ever closer, they laugh, they won't stop laughing.

"Get away," he wants to say. "Don't you touch her. Don't you lay a *finger* on her."

But his voice is gone. Words are gone. He can only growl, he can only hold, can only embrace, rage and anger and fear building inside, filling him, suffocating him.

He still can't breathe.

But he has to protect her. Nothing else matters besides protecting her.

It is then, though, at that precise moment, as the boys come closer and despair overtakes him, that Senketsu first feels it.

The sensation is soothing, somehow. It's relaxing, a gentle rhythm that seems to seep into his very soul and wash all his tension away, replacing the feelings with calm, with peace. The world's vibrancy-the musty scents, the richness of the burnt orange of the sun-all fade away, as though shrouded in fog.

Senketsu gasps. Ryuko's own breathing has calmed. Her once-pounding heart rate has slowed to a crawl. She's fast asleep, she's left him, she's gone to rest-and something is demanding that he go with her.

Something is pulling Senketsu away.

The world continues to grow more distant, muddled, as the sensation threatens to overtake him completely. He can't drift away, he knows, he has to be here, he can't leave, but the boys' words sound less and less like language, and the boys' shapes look less and less like humans, and he's hardly conscious, as another boy comes before them, arms outstretched, as though his small form can serve as a barricade.

"Bug off, creeps!" the boy says, Senketsu thinks, and the group groans and slinks away, leaving only the three of them there, right where Ryuko had fallen from the train.

Senketsu cannot say he trusts the new boy. The child will only hurt Ryuko, will only bring her harm, will only do her ill, but the feeling dulls everything. This sensation is too nice, too wonderful, and Senketsu can hardly recall, in the days to come, his body collapsing around Ryuko as the boy takes her by the wrist, as he drags her to hands that could bandage and heal in a way that Senketsu himself never could.

Sleep, Senketsu remembers a voice saying, time and time again.

Rest.

The second time, Senketsu feels it in a time of calm.

Ryuko slumbers so peacefully that he doesn't even hesitate to join her, the drone of Mr. Mikisugi's lecture vanishing into nothing, that wondrous sensation filling him to the brim.

The third time, Senketsu recognizes it when Ryuko holds her body close to his, her arms wrapped around his tiny form, her hands clutching him and all his exhaustion as though it is her own, her back pressed up against cold, cool porcelain.

All around them is the reek of toilet water, of nauseating, flower-scented disinfectants, of blood in a place it shouldn't be, of a war that shouldn't belong. He ought to feel sick, Senketsu knows, he ought to feel tense, on edge, but her grip is so warm, her scent is so calming, and her hold on him doesn't loosen even as the sensation becomes stronger, even as that man carries them in a way that Senketsu knows he never could, even as she drifts far away and leaves him in a drowsy haze of both wonder and fear.

Sleep, a voice says, as the man's steps slip into the soothing feeling growing inside, as the stranger never once tries to hurt her again.

Unwittingly, Senketsu does so.

The fourth time is a blur.

He aches. Everything aches. She's already wandered away from him, her breathing slowed, her body stained red and black and purple, covered in fresh sores and welts that bleed, that sting, that hurt, that he can't rub salve over, that he can't help.

That he'd given her.

She aches. She's silent against him, but every last bit of her aches, and he knows it, he feels it. Her pain is his own, as it has been since the day she first uttered his name from lips that now will not speak.

He can't stop staring, even as the world fades, even as that sweet sound hugs him as she had, once, her back against a cold, cool porcelain wall. Her face is red still, inflamed from their battle, and if he could forget it, if he could act as though he weren't what he is, he might think she looks peaceful right now, at ease, as though she hasn't a care in the world.

But he can't forget. He wants to carry her in arms he doesn't have. He wants to hold her like Kinagase had. He wants to bandage her face and her wounds like *ojisan* had. He wants to be anything but what he is.

She whispers his name, from a faraway place, as people come their way, surely to free her of him, to take him away. Her voice is quiet, strained, vulnerable.

"I'm sorry," she says, and the feeling overcomes him once more.

The fifth time, the feeling has grown stronger.

He is broken. He is lost. He feels torn in a million different directions, but she holds him together. She clutches him as though he is all that matters in the world, she holds him so close he can smell the hard citrus of the kitchen soap and the sweat that becomes his, and it is wonderful, intoxicating.

He can almost forget that he is incomplete.

But the sound is the most soothing of all. It is a sound he has come to love more than most anything, and it calls for him now, it resonates with his entire being, it caresses him and holds him and somehow, he knows that she will be safe.

Sleep, a voice says, as it always does in moments like this, though he realizes it is not a voice at all.

The world fades away as arms that are not his carry them away.

The sixth time, she notices.

She holds him close to her and he holds her close to him, collapsing to alien sheets that are soft and fine but not what she is used to, not home, not family. She does not say anything of it, but he understands.

Her breathing has calmed. Her heart is slowing, going to sleep, finally, after hours of racing and thudding and aching.

No, he can't blame her, he thinks, of course he can't, not after everything they had learned, but he has never felt more satisfied to feel the sensation overtaking him, the world taking on a dim glaze.

He yawns against her, just after she does, bringing her eyes to his.

"Are you tired, Senketsu?" she asks. There is surprise in her voice. She has not yet realized.

"Yes," he says. Her sound pulls at him. It is mesmerizing, incredible. He struggles to speak. "I am tired because you are."

She runs a hand along his neckerchief, her fingers seeming to dance to the rhythm inside.

"You can tell?" she asks.

"I can," he says.

"And it makes *you* sleepy?"

"It does."

Of course it does. She's drifting farther and farther away from him, and the world is already starting to fade. Her voice seems distant, fuzzy, as though she is speaking to him underwater, and her heart won't stop.

"You listenin' again, huh?" she asks. "You like the sound that much?"

She's drowsy. Her words are tired and sloppy, coming out long and drawn out. Her tone is sweeter than sugar, and she's smiling at him, lightly, crinkles at her eyes.

Would she ever speak like this to him, when her heartbeat is not the sound of the most beautiful lullaby?

"I do," he tells her, as though such simple words could convey what the sound means to him. "I adore it, Ryuko."

He feels her relax even more against him. She shuts her eyes. She is so close to slipping away.

"S'nothing special," she mumbles. She is not talking to him so much as to herself. "Nothing but a heartbeat. Nothing…"

She leaves him. Her heartbeat falls into one of its most wondrous sounds, slow and steady and peaceful and soothing, and he wishes to say that it is not just a heartbeat to him. There is nothing *nothing* about it.

And though she will not hear his words, he speaks anyway, as the world fades to nothing.

A/N: Inspired by an anonymous headcanon of Senketsu being lulled to sleep by Ryuko's heartbeat.

kiss - Ryumako

kiss

Ryuko wakes early, at precisely 3:10, filled with the immediate understanding that she had fallen asleep reading again, and she curses at herself silently, her thoughts for a moment only expletives and swears.

The realization is the last thing she needs right now. All it brings is negativity-irritation that gnaws at her, shame, the kind of discomfort that's drenched in disappointment and frustration and guilt-and she groans. She turns her face away, pressing forehead and eyes and mouth to the soft cotton of her pillowcase, breathing in the scent of her own strawberry shampoo.

It's a cool winter night. They always turn the heat down in the evenings, curling up together on the bed, sheets and blankets pulled up over their thighs and draped across their shoulders, and it's always nice at first, always cozy, warm. Even when the air is like ice against her face, all Ryuko needs is a gentle squeeze from the woman beside her, or a wet kiss on her lips, and any feeling of *cold* seems as strange and alien to Ryuko as a life without her.

But it's a bit too early now, or perhaps far too late, and there are no more playful giggles at this hour, no more warm body pressed up against hers. It's cold *now*, a part of Ryuko wants to think, does think, cruelly and bitterly, as though she had somehow been abandoned, as though sleep had captured her lover and left her to face the winter all alone, but no, there's a foot wrapped around her ankle, there's a hand lolling lazily across her stomach.

Or, at least, she *believes* that's what she feels against her.

Ryuko smiles in the depths of her pillow, pulling her face away once more, looking back towards the woman at her side. Even in the darkness, Ryuko can make out the twisted sheets and her body splayed all across the bed, chest rising and falling steadily, though a younger Ryuko would have surely deemed the room too muddied at a time like this, too vague, too shadowy, too dripping in *dark* to discern anything at all.

Darker than ass, she might have said. But she's older now, she thinks, she's learned, she knows better. There are dim streetlights outside, and the glow from the neighbor's, and inside there is the glaring red of the alarm clock that switches to 3:12, and it's more than enough to see her hand resting across Ryuko's belly, and her leg by Ryuko's calf, and how she hugs her pillow so tightly, her fingers clenched up even in slumber.

She's peaceful, at ease. Her snores fall into the quiet of the night, her breathing a soothing lull. She somehow even finds comfort in Ryuko's presence, in how Ryuko takes space that could have been hers, and no, Ryuko can't possibly be cold, not now, not when she can't even stop her smiling, not when she can't even keep the warm, fluttery feeling from building inside.

The feeling remains as Ryuko watches the clock on the bedside table switch to 3:13, its bright, glowing scarlet glinting off the cover of the abandoned book she hadn't left there.

Ryuko can't remember falling asleep-even the title of the pulpy novel escapes her-but she can imagine the scene. She can feel the thin, yellowed pages still stuck between her fingers, can picture how the woman at her side would have pulled the book away, would have tucked her in and shut off the lights and run her own fingers through Ryuko's thick hair, pushing the strands from Ryuko's eyes.

You work yourself too hard, she might have said. Or she might have whispered, You need to get more rest. And she might have shaken her head, brown hair touching her shoulders, too-long bangs concealing her vision.

Ryuko half-longs for the book again. Her hands have already brushed over nearly every silly romance novel the library owns, and she's brought almost as many into their home to read and to share and to laugh at, but she still knows so little.

She falls asleep again when the clock reads 3:16.

She wakes again when the clock reads 5:07.

The woman beside her sits up now, stretching her arms out above her head, yawning wide, breathing big. Every motion is quiet and silent, every movement gentle and delicate, but Ryuko no longer feels the warm hand against her, or the leg bumping into her own, and she flutters her eyes open, gazing wearily ahead.

Ryuko doesn't need any books from the library shelves to let out a soft moan at her partner's rising. She doesn't even need to think or consider. The sound seems to leave her of its own accord, a low whine, breathy and tired and longing.

Hands fall down at the noise, fingers meeting the lacy edges of the crumpled nightgown's skirt. She turns her attention to Ryuko, pulling herself ever closer, her face covered in a darkness that can't conceal the loving smile that's come over her lips.

Ryuko utters her name. She adores the feel of it on her tongue, cherishes the sound of it, and she speaks it again, softer, as her lover collapses beside her.

"Mako…"

She's still so drowsy-drowsy as hell, she might call it-but Mako looking at her like that is more than enough to make her wish to be wide awake.

"I'm sorry I woke you up again, Ryuko," Mako says. She looks deep into Ryuko's eyes, grabbing hold of her hand, squeezing her sleep-

weary fingers gently, the warmth of Mako's touch so comforting and soothing that Ryuko curses at herself once more. How could she have fallen asleep so soon the night before?

"I tried to be quiet," Mako goes on. Her smile falls, and her eyes dart away from Ryuko's, trailing to the sheets tangled up around them. "But I guess I'm no good at that, huh?"

Mako grins again, kind of, turning her attention back. Her gaze falls all over Ryuko once more, and she pushes herself closer, pressing her forehead against Ryuko's, her skin soft and warm and still smelling sweetly of the lemon lotion she applies before bed. She shuts her eyes, takes a deep breath, the tips of their noses just barely touching, her smile vanishing as she whispers, "I'm so sorry, Ryuko."

It's a usual Mako apology, a typical morning regret, and it's held for a moment, in silence. Right next to one another, Ryuko can see that Mako's hair is as disheveled as it always is at this hour, and her nightgown as crumpled and wrinkled, and her face as reddened from slumber and as creased from her pillowcase.

Mako is always embarrassed about her just-woken appearance, always bashful, always shy, but Ryuko feels too at home when they're so close and bare like this, feels too nice, and she says, with a coy smile of her own, "You can wake me up every morning if you kiss me before you go!"

Mako's eyes come open again. She breaks out into a wide smile herself, sitting up just enough to kiss Ryuko's sleep-weary cheek.

"Okay, now you go back to sleep!" she says.

Ryuko moans. It's even louder now, filled with even more longing. "A *real* kiss," she insists.

"That *was* a real kiss!" Mako argues, but then she laughs. She fiddles with her hair, brushing the frazzled strands from her eyes. "I

couldn't possibly kiss you with my nasty morning breath, silly."

Mako slips off the bed, stretching her arms out again. It will be nearly two hours before the sun rises, and the window she stands before doesn't drench her in the bright red-orange that comes with dawn, but Ryuko can still see Mako clearly. She watches in her sleepy daze, her eyes caught on the crinkled flowers at the back of Mako's floral-print nightgown, the skirt gathered comically in her undergarments, her hands up over her head as she yawns and stretches and sighs.

"I don' give a shit 'bout any damn morning breath," Ryuko says. Her words are soft and clumsy, nothing more than a weary whimper, a tired mumble.

"I think you're still too sleepy, Ryuko!" Mako says. Her hands fall, but she doesn't turn around. "Otherwise, you'd know that morning-breath kisses are gross! And make you feel bad! Make us both feel bad!"

She looks Ryuko's way again, grinning. "Come on, Ryuko! You know that!"

"Nah," Ryuko says, more awake now and more prepared to stay that way. "What I *actually* know is that kissin' you is always worth it."

Mako bites her lip. She keeps smiling, but shakes her head. "And what *I* know is that Ryuko needs to rest on her day off because she works too hard!" She turns around, straightening out her nightdress, her attention no doubt falling on the clock that now reads 5:10. "And I need to get ready before I'm late!"

Mako rushes away from the bed without another word, tossing her nightgown to the floor and pulling open the wardrobe, nearly tripping over herself in the dark, only hesitantly turning on the lights when Ryuko insists. She hums and sings as she prepares herself for the day, rifling through fabric and powder brushes and eyeshadow palettes and tubes of lipstick, rushing out of the bedroom and to the

bathroom and back again, always trying to keep herself quiet but never quite getting there.

The whole time she's a flurry of frantic energy, a bright ball of excitement, filled with more vigor and life than anyone should have at such a terrible hour, but she's Mako Mankanshoku, she can't spend a single morning *not* like this, and Ryuko wouldn't want it any other way. She hums along to Mako's songs in the depths of her pillow, so softly that she is sure Mako can't hear.

It's not until the clock reads 5:46 that Mako finishes. She sits on the edge of the bed, careful not to crush Ryuko's legs, her lips painted red and eyelashes thick with mascara, her body covered in a fine blue suit dress. Ryuko can still make out the lemon of her lotion, though it's stronger now, sweeter, mixed with lavender fabric softener and flowery perfume and setting powder.

"I'll kiss you before I go," she says, her red lips curled into a smile, kicking her legs absentmindedly, one after the other, "if you just answer one question, Ryuko!"

Ryuko shakes her head against her pillow. "I can't kiss ya *now*," she says. She looks away from Mako's pretty brown eyes, pulling her covers over her head. "I'll smear your lipstick. And you'll hafta deal with *my* morning breath and I won't hafta to deal with yours. That ain't fair."

Mako laughs. She takes the sheets away, running a hand through Ryuko's hair, ruffling what must already be ruffled into oblivion and back. "Well, if you *do* mess up my lipstick, then everyone will know that I've got the best wife in the whole wide world!"

Ryuko manages to bring her tired body up slightly, leaning her weary shoulders on her pillow, placing one hand down on her thigh and the other on the bed. She leans in close to Mako, focusing all her attention on those blackened eyelashes and shadowed eyelids and dark pupils.

"That's impossible," she says, taking in the scent of Mako's perfume as she leans in ever more, as she moves her sleep-worn hand from the bed to caress Mako's soft cheek, "'cause I already got the best wife in the whole wide world."

Mako flushes, still, even now. She smiles, placing her hand over Ryuko's, holding tight as she pulls it away. "Remember, Ryuko, you have to answer my question before I'll kiss you!"

Ryuko moves back with a scowl, crossing her arms, sinking into her pillow again. "So, what is it, huh?"

Mako is the one who leans in now. "It's an easy one!" she says. She keeps smiling, strands of her perfectly-made-up hair falling into eyes wide and alight with passion and fire. Ryuko can smell the peppermint of Mako's mouthwash and toothpaste as Mako's forehead touches her own, as soft, warm skin meets hers.

Mako's grin widens.

"Do you love me, Ryuko Mankanshoku?"

Ryuko has heard the question before.

She's heard it asked many times, across many years, the words spilling from those lips she's come to know well. She's even heard it asked as she will in only moments, soft and sweet and bubbling with more life than anyone should hold in them when the cold autumn sun hasn't even woken yet.

She sits before their bedroom mirror, bathed in the light oozing from the lamp beside her, running a brush through her mess of hair. Her motions are tired, and her eyes tired, too, but she manages to notice anyway.

She feels her heartbeat in her ears as she places the brush down against the cool wooden counter.

For a long, endless moment, Ryuko stares at her reflection. Her gaze is intense, unblinking, as though to confirm to herself that what she sees before her is real.

Mako sees. She pauses in her own morning routine, stopping by Ryuko only half-dressed, topless save for her frilly pink bra.

"What is it?" she asks. Her eyes dart from Ryuko's abandoned brush to her form still hunched over by the mirror, but Ryuko only comes back into reality when Mako speaks her name.

She always says it so sweetly, lovingly. The sound alone could snap Ryuko out of any daze.

Ryuko turns away from the mirror. "It's… my hair," she admits. Her face reddens as the words leave her. She sounds ridiculous and silly, like she's ordinary, worried about grays before her fifties.

Mako's quizzical look only makes her feel even more absurd. "Your hair?" she repeats.

Somehow, Ryuko manages to nod. She grabs hold of the new hairs that fall between her eyes, standing from her spot, coming towards Mako with uneven, wobbling steps and a face that grows redder by the moment. Her heart still beats too quickly, thudding in her ears.

"There's…" she tries, but the words get clogged up in her throat. She swallows hard, tries again. "There are *more.* See?"

At first, Mako only squints. She cocks her head, gazing intensely at the space between Ryuko's fingers.

But then her eyes widen in understanding. She smiles at Ryuko, settling herself down on the bed beside her, gesturing Ryuko to do the same, to come sit next to her.

"Oh, Ryuko," she says, as Ryuko sinks down into the soft mattress, "is it a bad thing?" She runs her fingers through Ryuko's hair,

grinning at the new strands. "It's so pretty!"

Ryuko pulls Mako's hands away, slowly, gently, shaking her head. "But something like this only happened when I… when we… "

She can't finish. But Mako understands. Her bright grin falls into something more solemn, more serious, and she places her hand over Ryuko's again, filling Ryuko with the sense of warmth and comfort that Mako always brings.

Ryuko feels her heart calm.

"It just means you're getting even stronger and even more amazing, Ryuko," Mako says. "You have nothing to worry about."

Mako smiles again, but Ryuko can't look. Even Mako can't completely erase the anxiety that's bubbling up inside, the fear, the shame, and she turns her eyes down, to her lap, to her hands, to the grungy carpet in their little apartment.

"But getting stronger is exactly what scares me," she says. "What if I-
"

Mako wraps an arm around Ryuko's back. She kisses her cheek, no doubt tasting the saltwater, and Ryuko finds herself leaning in even when she knows she should be moving away.

"Ryuko," Mako says, holding her girlfriend close, "you don't have anything to worry about. You know that."

Her voice is soft, tender. She runs her hand up and down Ryuko's arm and shoulder, her body pressed up against Ryuko's, her presence so soothing that Ryuko can't help but feel her worries dissipate more and more.

"You're going to be fine," Mako whispers, and all at once, Ryuko realizes that this scene would have been different, once upon a time. Once upon a time, Mako would have acted as though life were

nothing more than her own stage show. She would have put her hands up in the air and danced across the room. She would have orchestrated an excited, wild spectacle.

But now she is gentle. She is warm and soft and sweet and Ryuko could melt.

Mako asks the question.

"Do you love me, Ryuko?"

It's quiet, but passionate, loving. Ryuko falls more into Mako, throat aching, face wet.

"Of course I do," she says, the words choked up, spluttered. She speaks into Mako's shoulder, the sweet smell of Mako's flowery perfume filling her. "Of course I do… "

Mako stills her hand on Ryuko's arm, gripping it tight. "Then can you love yourself like you love me?" she asks. She pulls away from Ryuko now, and Ryuko knows she wants to look her right in the eyes, but Ryuko stares to the bed, to the ground, to anywhere but. "Because I love you, Ryuko, and I know that nothing's going to happen to you. You'll always be Ryuko."

She smiles brightly, kindly, beautifully. "You'll always be *my* Ryuko."

But Ryuko shakes her head. She feels hot, on fire. She feels as though she could change, disappear, the parasites inside taking over, controlling everything.

"How can you be so sure?" she asks. She still won't look Mako's way, folding and unfolding her hands in her lap. "I've fucked up. I've fucked up so many times, and I've-"

"And you've always come back," Mako finishes. She places warm hands on Ryuko's cheeks, lifting her head up, and Ryuko stares

back this time, eyes wet and wide and as red as what had brought all this on.

"You don't need to worry," Mako says, and she never stops saying it, as more and more come, as Ryuko returns home with more and more sappy library love stories, as Ryuko's worries fester and grow.

It's a hot summer night, when Mako first sees.

The apartment has only been theirs a few weeks. They're still growing used to it-to the carpet that smells strongly of smoke no matter how hard Mako scrubs it, to the thin walls and the train tracks nearby, to the reality of having a space all to themselves, just them.

Mako suggests it.

"It's just us," she says playfully, teasingly, pulling her floral nightgown over her head. She tosses the fabric aside, leaving it splayed across their creamy white sheets, her hair fluffy and disheveled and her body covered with nothing but lacy pink undergarments.

Laughter leaves her, light and airy giggles. "There's no need to be embarrassed!"

Ryuko smiles sweetly, even in the heat, laughing along. She asks to remove the frilly pink bra, moving behind Mako at her girl's excited approval, brushing soft hairs away as she undoes the snaps, her fingers pulling the garment free and onto the sheets.

"You know I got over being embarrassed a long-ass time ago," she whispers into Mako's ear.

Mako flashes her a mischievous smile. "I know you did," she says.

She turns to face Ryuko fully, asking to help unbutton her pajama top and then doing so with fumbling, slippery fingers when Ryuko nods her head *yes.* The bottoms come off too, and Ryuko's own blue-and-

white striped bra, and then they lie down together, as the summer sun sets, as the red-orange light covers them, their bodies spread out on top of their sheets.

"It's too hot to do anything," Ryuko groans after a moment of this, after a silence broken only by the roar of the train. She sounds as lazy as she feels, and she stares up at the darkening ceiling, dreading tomorrow and its even-warmer forecast. Mako's fingers run through Ryuko's hair, but she turns over at the comment, just slightly, enough so that she can look right into Ryuko's eyes.

She places a hand on Ryuko's bare stomach. "Too hot to do *anything*, Ryuko?" she repeats. She smiles coyly, her hand inching upwards, and Ryuko wants to smile back, to say, Well, it's never too hot for *some* things.

But Mako's bright expression falls quickly, as soon as her fingers touch it, her eyes widening as she looks down, as her hand curls up and drops to the sheets.

It's more than enough for Ryuko. Mako has never noticed, not once, not until now.

Ryuko looks away.

"Ryuko… " Mako starts, all the sweetness and fun and passion of before now replaced with worry. Ryuko doesn't need to see to know that she's examining it, her eyes running up and down the jagged line, her heart and mind trying desperately to understand.

"I didn't want it to heal," Ryuko says, as explanation. She still won't look Mako's way, her eyes focused on the dirty wall, her body feeling even hotter, the bright red-orange of the sun feeling even more suffocating.

"So, it just… it didn't?" Mako asks. "Ryuko, but-"

"I don't know how or why," Ryuko cuts in. "But it didn't heal." She takes a deep breath. "And I don't want it to. Ever."

Ryuko turns over, completely to her side, as though turning her back on Mako could get her to stop prodding, as though avoiding her eyes and worried face could end the conversation right here.

Mako places a gentle hand on Ryuko's shoulder.

"Would you mind if I touched it again, Ryuko?" she asks.

Ryuko isn't able to ask why before Mako answers herself.

"So I can feel what you feel," she says.

Ryuko shakes her head, the best she can do in her position. "That doesn't make any sense," she argues, and she stays right where she is, her face sinking into her pillow, her body bare and exposed and longing for Mako and yet fervently wishing to stay away all at once. "It's a *scar.* A fucking old scar. I don't feel shit from it."

She sighs. She feels her nakedness, a chill coming over her no matter the heat.

"And," she says, her voice muffled, speaking into her pillowcase, "I wouldn't even feel shit if you cut it right back open again."

Mako's warmth vanishes. A sickening sensation comes over Ryuko, one she recognizes, and she wraps her arms around herself, covering her scar and her exposed body like he had, once, before his warmth left her forever. What she feels now is what overtook her back then, she knows, when she fell without him and was the only one left, one of a kind, alone, all alone.

But no, that's wrong. Mako's hand is still there. It's still warm and soft and filled with life, and it squeezes her, tenderly, lovingly.

"How about another question, then, Ryuko?" she asks. "Would it be okay if I kissed it?"

Ryuko sits up so abruptly that her head spins. Mako sits up herself, her hand falling away, looking at Ryuko so intently, beaming and bright and smiling, and she's joking, Ryuko thinks, this is all some strange, Mako way of lightening the mood.

But none of Ryuko's thoughts can keep the heat from building in her cheeks. The red-hot warmth of embarrassment overtakes her. Even the summer sun no longer seems so strong.

"W-why the hell would you want to do a thing like that?" she manages, after a pause, spluttering. She breaks eye contact, a fire burning within. "Is there something you wanna tell me 'bout? I-I mean, you *can* kiss it if you want, it's not like I *mind* or nothin', but-"

Ryuko stops, her words slipping away. Warm, soft lips meet her skin, and they stay there a long moment, leaving behind a familiar comfort when they're gone, a feeling that always soothes Ryuko and calms her heart.

Mako grins up at her. "You tingled, Ryuko!" she says. "Your whole body trembled!" She runs her finger along the mark, taking in the wounded skin gently, lovingly. "And you think you can't feel anything."

Ryuko shakes her head. She puts her hand over Mako's, over her chest, her heart. "That's different," she says, but she can't explain herself, can't say why, and she shakes her head more, falling into Mako, into the woman she loves more than anyone else in the whole wide world, and Mako holds her in her arms. Mako embraces her and all the parasites inside, all the darkness that Ryuko can't erase.

She asks the question.

"Do you love me, Ryuko?"

She runs a hand through Ryuko's hair. She kisses her head, pressing her body ever closer, skin against skin, their hearts beating

as one. The smell of her perfume is mesmerizing. Her touch is precious, cherished.

"Because I love you, Ryuko," she says. "All of you."

Ryuko pulls away. She rubs at eyes that she swears aren't wet, at a face she'll insist is free of shining streaks.

"That's one helluva way of sayin' that you wanna kiss scars."

Ryuko smiles. She laughs. She tries so hard to be light, but there's a profound heaviness inside, the kind that she can't joke away, and she asks, much more solemnly than she means, much more seriously, "You tellin' me that you even love the parts of me that fuck up?"

Mako cocks her head. "Well, maybe not as much," she admits. She places a hand over Ryuko's scar once more, her palm warm and soothing against Ryuko's skin. "But yes. *All* of you."

When Ryuko puts her hand over Mako's this time, she squeezes.

Ryuko is the one who speaks first.

She feels she has to, as though her words would mean anything now and the truth weren't already clear. It's cool when they go-still early spring, the trees just beginning to blossom and the air just beginning to grow warm-and the trail is muddier than Ryuko would have expected, splattering her socks and shoes with a heavy coating of brown.

She's sure to hold Mako's hand as they make their way up.

"It's slippery," she says, as though that's all there is to it.

Mako's breathing is hard and labored when they decide to stop. It's not the top yet, simply an earlier stopping-off point, but the view is

still beautiful, and Ryuko still feels as high up in the sky as she did when she had wings.

She smiles at the sight, sitting down next to Mako by the edge of the cliff, shifting, slightly, until she finds a comfortable seat on the rocks. The Bay looks so small from here, nothing but a smear of blue in the distance, and the town seems so distant, like they're at the top of the world.

Ryuko turns to Mako and the big camera slung around her neck and asks if she'd like to take a photo.

"Maybe lots of photos?" she adds, grinning, the heat of their hike up finally getting to her now that they've stopped, her face burning hot.

But Mako shakes her head. She's uncharacteristically quiet, pulling the camera from her neck without a word, placing it down on the cliff beside her.

Ryuko feels her happiness deflate. She takes Mako's hand once more. "Are you okay, Mako?" she asks. "Do you need more water?"

She removes her backpack without waiting another moment, fingers fumbling with the zipper for a time before she gets it to go, hands shuffling through the bag's contents to find their canteens. "Or are you hungry? Or-or, do you want to go back?"

Her fingers close around a mom-made bag of trail mix, but Mako puts a hand over Ryuko's wrist. "No, I'm okay, Ryuko," she says, shaking her head, smiling sweetly, and Ryuko puts the bag down as Mako leans against her, feeling her face heat up even more as she imagines Mako taking in the stench of all her sweat and body odor.

But Mako takes Ryuko's hand again, entwining their fingers together, staying right where she is. "Ryuko," she says, her voice soft, breathy, "I just want to know one thing."

"Just one thing?" Ryuko echoes.

Mako nods. "And not about how good the view is at the top!" she says. "I want *that* to be a surprise!"

Ryuko tries to nod along, to understand. She wonders how much Mako feels all the perspiration built up on her bare shoulder and curses at herself about how gross that is, how unappealing, just as her face must be, burning red-hot as she sits so close to the girl of her dreams.

"So what is it, then?" Ryuko manages. She tries to smile. Her hand in Mako's feels so slippery.

"I want to know why you really wanted to take me here," Mako says. She tightens her grip on Ryuko, squeezing, looking out towards the trees and the Bay and the little smudge that is their town in the distance.

It's a serious sort of question, somber, and Ryuko is quiet a long moment before she can say anything back, her heartbeat louder than all the birds twittering around them and the sway of the leaves. Sweat drizzles down her face, falling over the bridge of her nose, dripping down her chin.

"Did you not want to come with me?" she asks, finally, as soon as she can.

Mako shakes her head. "No," she says. "I did. I like being with you."

Ryuko tries at smiling. She nods. "Yeah," she says. "Yeah! I like being with you, too."

It sounds lame, she knows, an understatement verging on a lie, and there's a lump building in her throat, she's burning up, on fire. This is the moment she's been waiting for.

Ryuko swallows. She swivels, turning to face Mako head-on, grabbing both hands, taking a deep breath as she peers into beautiful brown eyes.

"I wanted a place where it would just be us," she says, very quietly, trying desperately to keep eye contact but wanting so much to look away. "Because I wanted… I wanted to tell you… I…"

She shakes her head. However red her face was moments ago must be nothing compared to what it looks like now.

Mako stares, her mouth agape, eyes wide.

"I…" Ryuko tries again. "Ya know when I said that I didn't know what you are to me?" She squeezes Mako's hands. She smiles, the best she can. "Well, I know now. I think you know, too. Right?"

Mako doesn't answer right away. She keeps looking at Ryuko, tilting her head as though the words don't make sense, and Ryuko wants to say more. She wants to talk about all their days holding hands, and all the times she'd wrapped her jacket around Mako and held her close, and all those lazy afternoons they'd fallen asleep reading together, and how every moment she spends with Mako means the world to her. She wants to express herself like Mako does, wants to make the universe her stage, wants to say that she's known for a long time, just how she feels.

But the words won't come now. Ryuko can't voice any of it, and Mako is as quiet as she is, still staring, her hair brushing against her shoulder.

Mako doesn't speak, at first. She pulls her hands away. She stands, her skirt fluttering in the breeze, hair whipping past her face, looking far more beautiful covered in sweat and grime than anyone has the right to.

Ryuko stands with her, just as Mako puts her hands in the air.

"Ryuko!" she says, crossing her wrists, "I don't know anything!" She gestures wildly, talking fast, her eyes big and bright and alight with wonder, excitement.

"When I first saw you," she says, "you were so cool and amazing! You were taking down baddies and looking hot doing it! You could do anything because you were super awesome! And I could never measure up! You would never feel the same way about me!"

She pauses, and Ryuko realizes she had been breathing hard, because she gasps for air as she brings her hands down, as she looks to the rocks beneath them. Her energy seems to vanish, leaving behind something else, something somber, sad.

She comes closer, pressing her face against Ryuko's, their foreheads touching, their hands coming together naturally, as if by design. "But then you said that *I* was more than a friend to you, Ryuko," she says. "And then I knew that I didn't know anything. I still don't know anything."

She shuts her eyes, gripping Ryuko's hands tight. "I've loved you for so long, Ryuko. I was in awe of you. I admired you and I wanted you and I wanted to be *like* you and then I saw you for who you really are and I really, *really* came to love you and I…"

Mako shakes her head. "I knew that you were afraid, and it was like… it was like you thought no one could ever love you, and I couldn't believe it, and I've wanted to tell you, I mean, I've wanted to tell you for so long, but I didn't know… I didn't know how to tell you… I didn't know what to… "

She opens her eyes again, looking deep into Ryuko's, her own filling with tears. "But right now, I just want to kiss you. More than I ever have."

Mako leans in, and Ryuko doesn't refuse.

"I want that, too," she says.

She shuts her eyes, and Mako's lips are against her own. Hands wrap around her back, and she wraps hers around Mako's, pressing their bodies together, pushing them so close that Ryuko is filled with

the smell of her, with flowery perfume and mud and sweat, and it is wonderful, mesmerizing, Mako's hold soft and warm and tender and everything Ryuko could have ever dreamed. She cherishes every second.

It ends too soon.

Mako asks the question.

"Do you love me, Ryuko?" She's sobbing. Her lipstick is smeared, streaks running down her face, her eyes wide, rimmed with red.

Ryuko still tastes her. Her mouth was warm and wet and tasted like lipstick and croquettes and lemon-flavored tea. Her lips were soft and nervous, scared but wanting, and Ryuko would do anything to taste them more.

"Of course I do," she says.

Mako kisses her again.

Ryuko still feels a flutter in her heart when Mako pulls away.

"Well, you *do* have some pretty awful morning breath," she jabs playfully, a big smile on her face.

"But you'd kiss me a hundred more times anyway, right?" Ryuko asks.

Mako stretches her arms out over her head, rising to her feet. " *Two* hundred more times," she says with a wink.

Ryuko smirks. "Exactly what I thought."

Mako moves to leave. She zips up her purse, fluffs her hair, straightens out her pencil skirt. She stands on one leg, a hand against the door as she slips on her high heels.

"Now, you better do something fun for your day off after you're done resting!" she says. "I don't want to come home to find that you were just lounging around all day."

Ryuko moans, collapsing back into the sheets. She turns away from Mako, burying her face into the cotton of her pillow, protesting, "I can do whatever the hell I want on my day off!"

"But you *should* enjoy yourself," Mako says.

"This is enjoying myself," Ryuko answers.

Mako clucks her tongue. "I'm just *sayin'*, Ryuko," she says, her voice sweet, kind, "that you don't have to hide in here all day."

Ryuko shifts positions to see Mako smiling by the door. "You don't have to hide for me or anyone else." She cocks her head, brown hair brushing her shoulder. "You know that, right?"

Ryuko turns away again. "Of course I do," she says.

"Good!"

Mako unlocks the door with a *click.* She shuts off the lights, winter morning returning to the room again, surrounding Ryuko with darkness.

"I should probably get going before I'm late again," Mako says, her eyes surely on the clock. "Have some fun today, okay, Ryuko!"

She puts her hand on the door, no doubt, Ryuko knows, prepared to leave. It's nothing unusual, regular, everyday, but today, this morning, the thought brings Ryuko straight to her feet.

With all the grace of a drowsy, overworked young adult, Ryuko scrambles out of bed, tearing the sheets from her body, wobbling her way towards the door.

"Wait," she says, the world spinning just a bit as she stands before her wife's shadowed figure. Mako's hand falls from the door, and she tilts her head again.

"What is it?" she asks. She smiles, her cheeks pink. She bites down on her lip. She looks beautiful.

And Ryuko thought she was in love in high school.

A warmth comes over Ryuko's face, no matter the coolness of winter. Her pajama top is half-unbuttoned, her scar clearly visible between the fabric. Even in the darkness, all the red in her hair seems bright, glimmering, falling into her eyes.

She smiles, unabashedly.

"Can I kiss you again?"

four - Senketsu, Ryuko

four

Senketsu does not think much on time and dates, and he thinks that she does not herself, but when there comes to be a chill in the air, and he makes himself heavier for her sake, and the skies linger a long while on an endless gray, she always takes care to remember one particular day.

The first year, she wakes early and does not bring him with her. He thinks it odd, of course; for so long, he has grown accustomed to beginning with a gentle brush against him and a weary *good morning.* For Senketsu to open his eyes and see that she is not where she should be, collapsed just beneath him, is, you see, quite unnerving in its abnormality. The sound of her snores has gone, and there is not even a trace of the sweet melody of her heart.

Nothing could have happened, he tells himself, because he surely would have noticed if anything had, but still a kind of emptiness fills Senketsu at this strange and unusual situation, no matter how silly he considers himself for it. Where is the reek of her morning breath, he wonders, and where is her disheveled hair, and what has become of her tired voice pulling him free from his slumber? He thinks to move on his own accord, and he is fiercely prepared to discover what has become of her all on his own, but any anxieties building up inside him very much melt away when he takes note of the quiet humming emanating from just outside the room.

Senketsu would recognize that voice anywhere. The sound is fierce and gentle all at once, timid but strong, and Senketsu realizes that there is still a great darkness around him, and there are still a great many snores that are *not* hers, and he understands, all at once, that she has simply woken early.

It is only when the sun falls over him in dim streaks that she returns. Her hands are firmly behind her back and her lips upturned, though only slightly, forming a shy sort of smile that he knows to mean that she has not left him this morning without reason.

Her eyes meet his, and she says, in scarcely a whisper because her family is sleeping, "I'm sorry for leavin' ya." She's still clad in her too-small pajamas, and Senketsu sees that she has not so much as combed her hair. The strands stick out in many directions, but she does not seem to pay her unruly appearance any mind.

"I jus' didn't wanna wake you," she goes on, "'cause it's early, but I didn't know when else ta…."

A blush comes over her cheeks, the color nearly as bright as the hairs stuck to her forehead, and Senketsu holds back the smuggest sort of laugh. Whatever she has been up to this morning, she certainly does not want to admit that she has been touched by it.

She says, "I know you probably ain't keepin' track, but I met you a year ago today, and since I don't know when Dad made you, I was thinkin' that…."

She brings her hands out in front of her, revealing what Senketsu understands to be a lopsided chocolate cake set upon one of Mrs. Mankanshoku's nicest plates. A single candle rests in the center, decorated with twirling blue and red stripes, its flame dancing in the hazy light of dawn.

"I was thinkin'," Ryuko repeats, smiling at him very bashfully, "that today could be your birthday."

Senketsu does not quite know what to say to such a thing. He stares and stares. Frosting is splattered all about the plate, and the whole concoction looks as though it would crumble if anyone were to touch it. The creation is ugly in every sense of the word.

But in all his tiny life, there are few moments where Senketsu has felt so loved.

"You made this for me?" he asks. He feels tears coming to his eyes, and they soon start falling all across his fabric and down the wardrobe and to the wooden floors. It is not easy to speak in such a state, of course, but still Senketsu tries, his words hardly more than incomprehensible blubbering as he cries out, far too loudly for this hour, "Thank you, Ryuko!"

The embarrassment that spreads across Ryuko's face is more than enough to assure Senketsu that she has understood his meaning. She pulls the cake closer to her body and takes a step back.

"There's no need to be cryin'!" she says. Her own voice is now a bit more than a whisper, and her family stirs around them, and she quiets herself as she adds, "You'll get the cake all soggy!"

She focuses her eyes on the sad little thing.

"I know it's not much," she laments, "but I…."

"I love it, Ryuko," Senketsu tells her, and these words are true, but still she asks him if it's really so with such vulnerability that Senketsu wishes at once to be with her.

When he answers *yes* with a great earnestness and sincerity, she brings the cake closer to his face now free of tears, and she says, "Humans like to make a wish when they blow out the candles," and then she smiles very playfully at him as she continues on, "But you're not supposed to say what ya wish for, or else it ain't gonna come true!"

Senketsu cannot help but ask if wishes made upon birthday candles *ever* come true, to which Ryuko sighs very hard at him.

"Have a little fun," she says, and so Senketsu does as she tells him, and he considers a wish, and he speaks this wish silently to the

candle flame, knowing that he can think of nothing he wants more.

Senketsu does not inform Ryuko of his wish as he blows out the candle and tiny plumes of smoke fill the room. Ryuko smiles quite pleasantly at him afterwards, and Senketsu smiles back at her, in a way that only he can, and he says, "I would love to eat the cake, Ryuko, but…."

"I know," says Ryuko, "but *I'll* eat it, and then you can get to taste it in my blood!"

"But you should really lay off…" Senketsu starts to tell her, just as she licks the chocolate right off the candle and jams the wax into her mouth, but he stops himself. He looks closely at the crooked, falling-over little cake, and there is no shame in celebrating his birthday with a treat such as this, he thinks, how could there be, when this whole affair seems to have brought Ryuko as much happiness as a croquette dinner with her family?

But such a thought only brings a sense of great remorse to the little Kamui, and he sighs mournfully, filled with regret.

"Ryuko," he says, finally addressing the girl who has been frowning his way as though she is more than prepared to berate him should he dare launch into any sort of lecture concerning the topic of sweets for breakfast. He cannot look her way, and he quiets himself more than he has all morning as he asks, "Why is it that you would want to celebrate this day at all?"

All remnants of smoke are long gone from Senketsu's striped blue-and-red birthday candle. He can hardly keep his voice steady.

"Why," he tries, his words hardly even audible any longer, "why would you ever want to remember?"

Senketsu does all he can to avoid thinking on the day that he had first laid eyes on her, but still the memories come over him in an unforgiving flood. Her screams fill his mind, as do her disgust and

hatred and scorn, and Senketsu soon finds that he cannot bear to look at the crumbling cake just as he cannot bear to look at the woman whom he loves more than anything and anyone in the entire universe.

He looks to the floor instead. The sun no longer seems to wish to shine, and there are no more streaks of light upon the wooden planks. A dark cloud has no doubt come over the sky, and rain is surely soon to follow.

Senketsu sighs once more, and he speaks so quietly now that he is not entirely sure that he even speaks out loud at all as he says, "There is nothing worth celebrating in today."

But Ryuko shakes her head. Senketsu does not have to look to know that she does so. He can hear the *rustle, rustle* of her pajamas as her hair brushes against the collar, and he can picture the movement in his mind.

"You *were* shitty to me at first," she says. "And what you did wasn't okay."

She pauses. Senketsu dares not look at her and so continues to look to the floor. It is covered in shadows, and the overwhelming guilt that has taken a hold of him does not let him even begin to realize that there are no longer any sounds of snores or rustling from her family. There is silence all around them, so palpable and tangible that Senketsu hardly dares to breathe.

"But," Ryuko says, and Senketsu is sure that she removes the candle from her mouth because she speaks much more clearly as she tells him, with the unbridled, fiery passion that he knows more than he knows himself rests within her but rarely lets itself show in times such as these, "if I hadn't met you that day, I don't know what I woulda done."

Ryuko pauses again, as though struggling to come up with the right words to say. Senketsu does not look, but he imagines her fiddling

with the sleeves of her pajamas, or fumbling with her hands, because these are the things she does when she is nervous and with him, and then she tells him, "What you did today ain't worth celebrating, but *you* are, Senketsu."

It is only at this moment that Senketsu dares look to her, and when he does, he sees that she is smiling at him in such a way that he thinks he could use another birthday candle to wish his wish another time over. He feels his tears come over him again, and he thanks Ryuko much too loudly as these tears fall to the ground, and Ryuko scolds him again and pulls the cake away before saying, "I hope it's not selfish of me, thinkin' of your life only beginning when we…."

She does not finish, but she does not have to, and Senketsu says, "My life *did* only begin when I met you."

At these words, Ryuko's family claps their hands at the whole scene, and Ryuko becomes very flustered at the fact that they had been watching all along, but their happy smiles and cheers make her flustered feelings quite short lived, and she and Senketsu soon come together, as they always do, his skin becoming hers and her heartbeat filling him as though it is his own.

Even Senketsu can agree that chocolate cake *would* indeed be the best breakfast to have on a day such as this one, and so they come before the table with Ryuko's creation and eat it as though it is truly a proper meal to begin a day with. Only Mataro is crass enough to say a thing about Ryuko's under-mixed eggs and the bit of baking soda that might not have been blended well enough, either, and when Senketsu tastes the cake in Ryuko's blood, he hardly keeps himself from crying once more.

Five more birthdays pass between the two of them before another chilly, gray day where colored leaves have spent their time making dark masses on the ground arrives with a cake from Ryuko topped with four lopsided candles.

Her cake-making skills have not improved much over the years, though she has tried many different varieties of cake. This one seems to be some sort of banana cream, and it is bright and yellow and white and joyous even when the weather outside is not.

"Happy birthday," she says, as she has grown used to over all their time together, and she places the cake on the rickety table that she had purchased herself, and Senketsu knows that she has decided, as has become tradition, to eat this cake for breakfast.

He makes her what he thinks to be a cheerful outfit for the occasion, covering himself in frills and folds and ribbons, but Ryuko laughs at his attempts and says, "No, no, no, just be *you,* Senketsu, 'cause today I'm celebrating *you.* "

Senketsu does not quite know what Ryuko means by this because he can be any outfit anyone could ever desire, and he is not so sure what he himself truly *is* anymore. But he tries his hardest to bring a genuine smile to Ryuko's face and so fulfills her request the best he can, changing his body into a pleated skirt and long sleeves that she always pushes up and a pretty pink neckerchief that falls to her belly that he no longer covers. He makes a shiny black belt and little pouches that she once used to hold her tiny Scissor, and he even makes the eyepatch that he had worn what seems so many years ago now.

Ryuko becomes very quiet at the sight of him in such a state. She seems at first upset, and Senketsu feels a pang when she says, "I'm too old to be wearin' sailor uniforms, you know," but then she sort of smiles and fiddles with his tie and his collar as she had once done, and she tells him, "And you're too old to *be* sailor uniforms, but you still pull it off way better than you should," and Senketsu knows that she is not truly upset at him, and he manages a laugh of his own.

"I'm only four years old, you know," he says, looking to the candles that appear as though they could tumble off the cake any moment. "Am I even old enough to be a sailor uniform at all?"

Ryuko brushes his eye, the way she always does when she feels particularly proud of him. Senketsu no longer flinches at her touch in times such as these, and he gazes right into her eyes as she tells him, " *Physically* you may be four, but *mentally,* you're way older than me. You're like, Satsuki-old."

"But Satsuki is hardly older than you," Senketsu says, very matter-of-fact.

Ryuko laughs. "Well, maybe you're not *that* old, anyway."

Her smile falls away, and she focuses a particular amount on the four candles spitting smoke into the air, as though it is only now that she truly sees them at all. "Did you know, Senketsu," she says, running her hand over his collar in a manner that Senketsu knows to mean that she does not realize she is touching him, "that today would be your Golden Birthday?"

Senketsu does not particularly know what to say, and so he is silent a moment, and Ryuko takes to fiddling with the glove that Senketsu has never changed about himself, still as bright and red as it was the day he was born, until finally Senketsu answers, "No, I do not know what such a thing is, Ryuko."

"Well," Ryuko says, pulling her hands off him, "you're turning four today, on the fourth of October. That's what a Golden Birthday is."

She does not look his way. Senketsu stares at the candles, too.

"I see," he says.

"Can you believe we've known each other so long?" Ryuko asks. "Four years!"

Senketsu can tell from the sound of her voice that this isn't a minuscule amount of time to her at all, and he says, "It does not feel like it has been that long."

Ryuko's voice becomes very quiet. "It doesn't feel like it's been that long at all."

"My body seems to think it's not that long, either," she adds. This she says a bit more exuberantly, and Senketsu thinks it must be because it is his birthday and she wouldn't want to be in a dour mood on such a day as that, and so she goes on, perhaps accordingly, "Satsuki got a big growth spurt when she was twenty, you know, and that still hasn't happened to me! I still fit you like this just like I did when I was seventeen!"

"You've always been something of a late bloomer," Senketsu tells her. He says this in his smug, I-know-more-than-you voice, to which Ryuko crosses her arms and leans back on the bottom two legs of her chair, just as she knows Senketsu doesn't like.

"Says the guy who's just turning *four* today!" she protests.

" *Physically* four," Senketsu corrects her, echoing her words, and Ryuko falls back on her chair and tells him right back, "And still *mentally* too young to know anything about my blooming… ness!"

"Now, I don't need to be very old at all to understand *that*," Senketsu says, and Ryuko pouts at him as though she is truly seventeen again, and she argues, "Well, you don't *look* very old at all, now do ya?"

Senketsu might pout at her himself, just a little bit, at such an accusation. But then he dedicates himself to becoming something very grandmotherly, making his body a great expanse of pastel colors filled with lace and so much fabric that not a hint of Ryuko's skin even seems to show, and he says, "Well, how about *this* ?"

Ryuko breaks out into laughter so boisterous that she has to steady herself on the edge of the table. "Well," she says, between heaving breaths, "now ya just look like a little kid trying to be a grown-up!"

Senketsu frowns, in a way that only he can, the cloth that forms his face perhaps a tinge pinker than it was only moments before, but he manages to concentrate just enough to shift his body into something more usual for the two of them, giving himself a longer skirt than he had in his teenage years, though with shorter sleeves, and Ryuko very suddenly feels much more comfortable against him than she has since they had first sat down together at this table.

"Now you seem just right," Ryuko says, and her words bring a great warmth to Senketsu, even though it is the time of year where there is a constant chill in the air that brings Ryuko to adorn him with scarves and jackets whenever she so much as steps outdoors.

Neither says anything for a moment, and both stare a long while at the four candles on the crooked, lopsided cake. The sun had not decided to come out today to celebrate Senketsu's birthday, and there is a certain darkness to the space around them, even though, had it just been a season before, this morning would have been as bright as the color of Ryuko's cake.

Senketsu feels as though he is coated in shadows as he asks, trying to be light but failing very much, "Do you think it says something about me, that my Golden Birthday falls on such an unlucky number such as four?"

"Don't be silly," Ryuko says, and she does not seem at all amused.

They do not speak any more on the subject, and when Ryuko eats the cake, and Senketsu tastes it in her blood, he hardly keeps himself from crying. There have been four years and four cakes but only one wish, and perhaps he has never wished for this wish to come true more than he does now.

Dozens more birthdays pass between Ryuko and Senketsu, but never does Ryuko get the growth spurt she wanted, and she spends a great many mornings sighing before her bathroom mirror.

She dates and breaks up, loves and loses, cries and laughs, and Senketsu stays with her through all of it, becoming anything she would like him to be and anything he would like himself to be-except, that is, what they would both like to be more than anything.

"I can't," he says, when Ryuko inquires, and she nods her head in a resigned understanding.

On the day that Senketsu is greeted with a less-lopsided cake and a *happy birthday* that sounds even less joyous than it had the year before, Senketsu looks to the fourteen candles that seem ready to tumble off the frosting no matter how much more stable Ryuko had learned to make her baked goods, and for the first time, he wishes a new wish.

It only takes until that very afternoon for his wish to seem to come true. A frantic Iori and Inumuta come to the door not long after Ryuko and Senketsu return from work, and they say, "Come with us," and the two of them can do little but follow. Iori and Inumuta lead the way to the lab that they had built together, and they sit Ryuko down on a rolling gray chair, and they reveal that there is a way, you know, to rid your body of them.

Ryuko does not say anything.

Senketsu does.

He asks, "Will it hurt? Will the effects be immediate?"

Iori tries to be reassuring. "No," he says, "it will not hurt."

Inumuta tries to be honest. "It will probably hurt," he says.

But both Iori and Inumuta look to each other and agree that it will not take long for the drug to do its work, and so Senketsu says, without giving this whole situation another thought at all, "You should take it, Ryuko."

But Ryuko does not seem so ready, and she does not seem at all convinced. She fiddles with Senketsu's glove, her fingers running over the fabric as though she intends to reassure him, though they both understand that she is the one truly in need of reassurance.

"If I take it," she says, "I'll be a normal human again?"

She speaks the word *again* in such a manner that Senketsu recognizes to mean that she has never actually viewed herself as a normal human at all.

"Yes," says Iori. "Your body will be as it should."

"As it should," Ryuko repeats. She scoffs, crossing her arms. "And what about Senketsu, huh?" she asks. "If Senketsu takes it, what'll happen to him?"

The looks that Iori and Inumuta give each other say everything, but still Inumuta speaks. "Well, he'll die, of course," he says. "Senketsu isn't like you-"

Ryuko does not let him finish. "He's the *only* one like me," she says. She stands from her spot, her heart beating so quickly that Senketsu very nearly fears, no matter how nonsensically, that it will give out on her.

But it does not, of course, and Inumuta stands, too. "Wait, Ryuko," he says. "You have to understand that-"

Again, Ryuko does not let him finish. Her voice is trembling, but the anger and venom of her words are clear.

"If you don't have a bullshit magic drug for Senketsu," she says, "then you don't have a magic bullshit drug for me."

Everyone tries to reason with her. Iori blocks the door. Senketsu says that he doesn't need any drug. Inumuta speaks of how much had been dedicated to this research.

"It would make everyone happy," he says, "if you would just take it."

But Ryuko will not listen

"If you don't have a bullshit magic drug for Senketsu," she says, once more, "then you don't have a bullshit magic drug for *me* ."

Eventually, Senketsu loses track of birthdays. Cold autumn mornings that should be greeted with a tilted cake and a smile pass by without any of it, and he begins to fear the days that he'll have to take on a form that he has not yet and never wishes to be.

On the day that there should be a cake with twenty-four candles, Senketsu sneaks away from Ryuko in the very early hours of the morning and dials a number that he has never before dialed, and especially not at such a terrible time.

"This better be important," says the voice on the phone, and Senketsu tries very hard not to think of how this voice no longer sounds like the voice of a man in his twenties.

Senketsu swallows before he speaks.

"It *is* important," he insists. He continues on as quietly as he can muster.

"It's about Ryuko."

No more words are needed, but more are spoken anyway, and the two come upon an agreement that brings Iori to the door at an hour when nobody should be up and about, let alone coming to people's doors.

But no matter the time, Iori looks very much awake when Senketsu meets with him. The man smiles kindly, graying hair falling into his eyes as he leans down and hands Senketsu a small container.

"You're doing the right thing," Iori assures the Kamui, but Senketsu never feels as heavy as he does in that moment, looking to this man's nice wrinkled smile and holding what he knows carries within it the power to change what Ryuko does not wish to be changed but *should* wish to be changed

"All it takes is one," says Iori, and Senketsu stares at the tiny, minuscule capsule long after Iori leaves. It is nothing, he thinks, but it is everything that Ryuko needs.

But no matter how much Senketsu thinks to drop the capsule into Ryuko's Calpis, or slip it into her rice, or place it on her tongue while she slumbers, he cannot bring himself to follow through.

Ryuko holds Senketsu so close when she sleeps, and once, he hears her say what she said what seems so long ago now, when she had crossed her arms and willingly left a happy life behind her.

Four days after Senketsu's twenty-fourth birthday, he wakes a great deal earlier than he would on any other ordinary day. There's a chill to the air in the apartment, because Ryuko does not wish to spend the money on heating just yet, she says, and outside the window, Senketsu sees nothing but darkness that he knows will soon fade to gray with the rising of the sun. Old, soggy leaves rest on their windowsill and against the panes, and he looks on these ugly reminders of autumn as he slips away from her.

Ryuko shivers at the absence of his touch. Senketsu does not look to her face as he wraps her in a blanket that cannot hold her as he does, and he pretends that he does not hear her soft cry of longing.

He comes to the kitchen and leaves the capsule where there should still be the falling-over remnants of a cake waiting to be eaten for yet another indulgent breakfast. If Ryuko had still thought his birthday something worth celebrating, Senketsu thinks, then perhaps she would have made a vanilla cake with strawberry frosting, or perhaps a chocolate cake topped with fudge.

Once, what seems an eternity ago now, he remembers that she had decided that a cheesecake was much more interesting. Her creation had a crust made from cookies, but the cream cheese had been spoiled, and she spent a great many days sick. That cake became nothing more than a splatter against a garbage bag before long.

The memory leaves Senketsu just as the darkness does outside. Perhaps the capsule before him should be nothing but a stain against a garbage bag as well. Ryuko will never take it. Senketsu wonders if she would even consider it, if he said all the right words. He wonders if she ever has.

It does not take long for Ryuko to notice Senketsu's absence. She comes to the kitchen table where he has left the tiny capsule in plain sight, her footsteps loud and pattering, as though begging him to look her way.

But Senketsu does not, and he cannot, and she stops behind him, so close that her warm breath brushes against his collar.

"I'm freezing," she says, and Senketsu can no longer ignore that he had not heard the rustling of the blanket that he had left behind as she had come his way.

Ryuko does not lean in any closer. "You know I ain't payin' for heating yet, right?" she asks.

Senketsu sighs.

"Sorry," he tells her. "Sorry."

He shuts his eyes. She moves away, to the other side of the table, right where the capsule sits.

On a sunny day, Senketsu imagines that the tiny thing would be shining in the early morning light. On a sunny day, Senketsu imagines that it would seem to sparkle.

But it is not sunny. It is dark and dreary, cloudy and murky, and when Ryuko sits across from him, the capsule does not appear to be a glimmering beacon.

It appears dull and ordinary.

Ryuko takes the capsule and holds it between her fingers. "You think it tastes like shit?" she asks. "Because I *bet* it tastes like shit."

Her attention is not on the drug, however. She looks directly to him, her gaze study, unwavering.

"Of course you knew I had it," Senketsu says.

"You're a terrible liar," she answers. "And you can't keep a secret. Not to save your life."

She puts the capsule down. She could crush it in her fingers, reduce it to nothing but powder and dust in only a moment. But the little drug hits the hard surface of the table with a quiet *click,* rolling left and right before it finally steadies itself and is still.

"What would you have done, if I had made you take it?" Senketsu asks.

Ryuko's eyes still do not leave him, not for a long moment. But then she shakes her head, laughing, and she comes to her feet with a horrible *screech* of her chair. The hazy light drenches her exposed skin, and for the first time all morning, Senketsu sees her nakedness.

"Are ya gonna keep running yer mouth at me," she says, "or are you gonna get your ass over here and give me some boob support?"

Sixty-four days before Senketsu's fortieth birthday, he becomes that which he had never wished to be.

The two of them sit before what's left. Ryuko says that it's not fair. She says that it wasn't supposed to be this soon. She says how dare you, how dare you, how dare you.

But nobody answers. There is no tired, reassuring smile now, telling the both of them that everything will be all right. There is no one to say that it's merely a simple surgery, nothing more. There is no one insisting that they ought not worry, that it's not going to be the end, not yet, I swear it.

Ryuko only manages to look just before they leave. She says what she has said to him with every anxious brush against his fabric and every frenzied beat of her heart. She says what she has held deep inside her ever since she first took hold of her phone and the news washed over her like a relentless flood.

"Sis," she says, "what the hell am I supposed to do now? What the hell am I supposed to do when… when…."

She shakes her head. Tears fall, but she does not cry out.

The air is filled with the scent of incense and flowers and fruit.

On Senketsu's fortieth birthday, the skies are not gray and dark and murky.

Bright, clear sunlight falls through the windows when Senketsu awakes to find that Ryuko has gone.

"How did you…" he starts to say, but it is at this moment that Ryuko steps into the room, her arms behind her back and a bashful smile on her face as though she is eighteen again.

"I'm magical, you know?" she says. "And a magician never tells her tricks!"

"Magical," Senketsu repeats. He does not see the humor in the situation.

"Of course," says Ryuko. "Just as magical as you."

She brings her hands out in front of her, revealing what may very well be her ugliest cake yet. It's as falling over and lopsided as always, with frosting and bits of chocolate cookie spattered and smeared all along the plate on which it sits. Forty candles rest haphazardly on the crumpled surface, looking near ready to set the entire concoction on fire, and Ryuko's smile only grows at Senketsu's utter bewilderment.

"Happy birthday, Senketsu," she says.

Senketsu does not quite know what to say.

Ryuko places the cake down on the bed and sits beside him. "I know it's been a while," she says. "I bet you still think that there's nothing worth celebrating in today."

Senketsu cannot look at any of it. Not at the cake, and not at her face.

"There is not," he tells her.

"But you're wrong," Ryuko says. She sighs very deeply, and Senketsu hears her hands curl around the crumpled sheets beneath them. "After… Satsuki died, I realized something, you know?" Ryuko pauses. She swallows down the tears that Senketsu has only ever been able to brush away but never stop.

"I realized that this fucking sucks," she says. She laughs, the kind that is pained and miserable and sad. "I realized that this shit's… so unfair. I could be the best damn person in the whole world, and I could wish and wish and *wish* 'til I'm even bluer than the damn ocean, but some things just ain't possible. Some things are *never* gonna be possible."

Her grip on the sheets loosens with a gentle *rustle, rustle* of fabric, but still Senketsu does not look her way. He shuts his eyes, the guilt he has felt for all these years twisting and curling inside him.

He says, "But it *could* have been possible, Ryuko. It could still *be* possible, if you would only-"

Ryuko does not let him finish. "No," she says. "It ain't possible. Because all this shit that I had to go through-and all this shit that I'm gonna *keep* going through, over and over again-is the loneliest fucking shit in the whole goddamn universe. And I realized that I could never, ever live with myself if I left you to handle it all alone."

She can hardly speak any longer. Her voice has become choked up, wounded, but still there is a great power in her words as she declares, "I could never, ever be happy if I made you suffer all by yourself."

Senketsu opens his eyes. She is smiling and crying and naked and beautiful, and she says, "If this is how things have to be, I wouldn't want to go through it with anyone but you."

Ryuko pushes the hideous birthday cake his way.

"So," she says, "you got a wish for today, or what?"

A/N: Intended as a celebration of the OVA's fourth anniversary, having originally been released on September 3, 2014.

lots and lots - Ryuko

lots and lots

She sees him twice a year, maybe three times. He writes on occasion, but his short, messy letters never say what she wants them to, and after years of keeping the crumpled pages for reading and rereading, she tears them all to pieces.

Once, he sends a guitar. A birthday gift, the note says, and she thinks it must be a coincidence. Her father never could have known.

She plays in the late afternoons, in places where she'll find no one else. She sings after drinking overpriced coffees.

But she has too many enemies for a beautiful guitar to last.

She catches their reflection in the long mirrors that line the gym walls and asks how in the world it all works.

He does not know what she means.

She holds a hand to her hair. The strands are bright and red, leaping into the air like fire.

His voice is a low rumble. The sound fills her as though it is her own.

We are one now, he says. Your skin is my skin, and mine is yours.

The words remind her to once more return to herself.

But when she looks to the glass, she still sees him.

She thinks on the sentiment often.

She repeats it in her mind, like a mantra.

You are not alone anymore. We all love you, lots and lots.

But she fears what she feels must only be inevitable. When she sleeps, she sees those she cannot help. She feels her dying father's hand in hers.

And yet, when she wakes, she sees the girl whose smile lights up her whole world. She feels the warmth of dinner served in a bowl that bears her name.

You know that, right? the girl asks.

Her heart cannot stop fluttering.

Of course, she says.

She believes for quite a long while that the woman who stands in her way has a heart of ice.

But in that very woman's arms, she is filled with the same kind of fire that had been hers, once, only moments ago.

It has been years since she has cried like this. She cannot stop herself, the tears falling without her wanting and her sobs stealing her breath, but her sister is there, and then there is another arm around her, and another, and another, and soon it seems that the entire world is right there, by her side.

She thinks of him often.

She thinks of him when she walks alone and when she looks to her reflection and when she cannot sleep. She thinks of him when she is so filled with laughter that she is sure she could burst.

And it is at times like these-when she has just finished a meal with her family, or gone shopping with her sister, or pulled the kinds of pranks that he would surely deem childish-that she repeats his words.

It was fun, she says, silently, because she knows that he hears.

It *is* fun.

Thank you.

A/N: A celebration of *Kill la Kill's* fifth anniversary, with the first episode having aired in Japan on October 4, 2013.